

Every Rose Has Its Thorn

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Summary: Love and pain are two sides of the same coin. To know love is to know pain. Hiccup and Astrid are about to learn this in the most intense ways. When Astrid's Uncle Finn dies it is the beginning of a journey of shared loss and pain, of friendship, grief, and growing respect and affection for each other. Can it be that two losses can lead to a whole new life for them both? Modern AU

1. Chapter 1 - Grieving

Every Rose Has Its Thorn " A HTTYD Fanfiction

There was a distant rumble of thunder that loomed ever closer like some slumbering beast just waiting to wake up. The sky was a dull grey and as miserable as the atmosphere was in the city of Berk.

>Hugo 'Hiccup' Haddock stood in the hulking shadows of his father, Gerard who was more commonly known as Stoick and his mentor, Craig Gobber beneath a huge black umbrella. He tugged at his tie. He hated formal dress occasions, but funerals were the worst, they were the absolute worst. Especially when it was for a man like Finn Hofferson. Finn Hofferson had been a great man, a brave soldier, fearless. Finn had been loved and respected by all he met and to Hiccup at least, it seemed so wrong that such a good and kind man could have died.
The rain kept falling and still the priest carried on talking over it. Hiccup was hardly even listening to a word he said now, his mind wandering elsewhere.

>There were so many people here, not surprising really considering how popular Finn had been around here. There were people from the local stores, general residents of the city, staff from the schools, and of course the marines. A group of them had come to the funeral to pay tribute. They all stood there, looking so serious and morbid. Hiccup didn't think too much of them but he'd never been one for fighting. Still, it was nice of them to pay their respects.
Finn had always taken great pride in the young marines he helped train and the brave men he'd fought beside. He'd always been very proud of

those young men, and he had great pride in his city and country. He always said he fought, not to stop others, not because he hated them or their beliefs, but simply to keep his home safe, to protect the things he loved most.

>And the one thing Finn had always loved most, always been most proud of, was his niece " Astrid.
Hiccup glanced up to look at the beautiful blonde that was Astrid. She was in Hiccup's class at school and Finn was right to be proud. Astrid was not only beautiful, but talented. She was brilliant in all her subjects, though perhaps a little weaker in the sciences and mathematics, phenomenal at sports and exceedingly popular. He watched as she stepped quietly forward to lay a single rose upon the coffin as it was lowered into the ground. Even with all the rain, Hiccup could make out tear tracks on her face, not that she'd let anyone see her cry.

>She straightened up and stepped back from the hole in the ground where the coffin now lay. She wore a simple black dress but it fitted her beautifully. She complimented it with her own unique style by wearing boots with it. She also had a shawl draped over her shoulders that covered her head as well. Even on this sad occasion, she still looked beautiful.
Her father, Alric Hofferson, stood under a black umbrella like the one Hiccup's father was holding. He extended an arm to embrace his daughter but she stepped away from him, even though it meant getting wet. Astrid said nothing and showed nothing on her face as she stood listening to the priest carrying on talking. After a few more moments they began shovelling dirt back over the coffin.

>Hiccup had never seen the appeal of being buried under six foot of dirt to rot in death, but others certainly did. He stood in respectful silence as Astrid and a few others covered the coffin with dirt. Once it was buried, Astrid stood again, she wiped her eyes with her shawl but she still showed no sign that she'd been crying. Hiccup's father squeezed his shoulder which was meant as comfort, but it just reminded Hiccup of his father's presence.
They remained standing there to watch the gun fire and see as a marine folded the flag and passed it to Astrid. Her hands shook slightly as she took it, but she stood steady as rock and fearless as her uncle as she took it from them. Then she turned on her heel and walked purposefully towards the black limo provided by the funeral service to take her and her father to both the funeral and the wake. Her father hurried after her but she didn't even glance back. Hiccup sighed.

>"Come on son, we'll see her at the wake." His father spoke for the first time since this morning when he asked Hiccup if he'd done his teeth. They returned to their own black car with Gobber and followed the limo to the city hall where the wake was to be held.
Nobody spoke much on the way, Hiccup was dreading it. What was he supposed to say to her? How do you talk to someone who has just lost someone they love? What do you say to them?

>There's nothing you can say. He could still recall his mother's funeral six years ago. He'd been only eight years old then but he remembered hating having to talk to people when all he wanted was to be alone and cry. He had no idea how Astrid might respond or how she'd want people to be.
They arrived at City Hall far too quickly for Hiccup's liking. There were even more people at the wake than had been at the funeral. The only reason they'd gone to the funeral was because Hiccup's father was the Mayor of Berk and because the family had once been very close to Finn.

>"We'd best offer our condolences." Gerard said as Gobber nodded. "Hiccup, why don't you go talk to Astrid, she's in your class." He said as if this meant Hiccup had a clue what to say. Whilst it was

true that they were in the same class, he'd never managed to get the courage up to talk to her casually, and when they did speak he always got tongue-tied. And now, now his father wanted him to go and talk to her, at her uncle's funeral?! Gobber nudged him, and Gobber's nudges always sent him stumbling forwards and coming close to face planting the floor.
"Git' on with ye lad. She was there for you now go repay the favour." He said and Hiccup walked away sighing. Like he'd ever forget that.

>Gobber had been busy consoling his father leaving Hiccup standing by the grave crying. Then she'd come over. She never even said a word, she just took his hand in her own and squeezed it. She didn't once let him go all that day. Then when it came time for her uncle to take her home, she looked reluctant to leave him. She didn't give him that pitying look everyone else did, she was just real and sympathetic and understanding. He hadn't wanted her to go but when she did, she hugged him goodbye.
It was the only time she made contact. He gulped as he approached the grieving blonde.

>"Thank you." She said quietly as another mourner offered their condolences. Hiccup stumbled over his feet stopping clumsily in front of her.
"Ummm..." He stuttered as she stared at him with blue eyes glassy with tears she refused to cry.

>"Oh, hello Hiccup." She said her voice softer than usual. Everyone called him Hiccup, something to do with him being a blip or a 'hiccup' in the system or plan. He didn't know what but his cousin had called him it back when they were kids and it stuck. It was not affectionate but he didn't care. He tried to make his mouth form words.
"Ummm..."

>"It's really nice of your family to come." She said glancing around the room. "He'd be really touched." Hiccup raked his brain for words he could say. Any words would do. "So many people turned up... And I don't know most of them. But they all seem to know me. I feel like I hardly knew him at all." She sniffed slightly. "Even the marines, their tribute was so nice. And the things everyone said were wonderful." He could hear the words catching in her throat. He wanted to say something or do something to comfort her, but his mind was blank. "Everyone keeps saying how sorry they are and asking how I am. It's such a stupid thing to say. I mean, I lost Mum... But that was different. I was barely old enough to even know she was my Mum. I didn't really miss her... But this... This hurts. Really badly." Words. Any words Hiccup thought desperately. "I mean, I'm trying so hard to be strong, but it's just so difficult." He shifted awkwardly on his feet wondering what to do. "I know I don't have to, I've cried obviously, but I try and keep it private. I don't want everyone knowing and fretting or asking questions." She sighed again. "Thanks for listening Hiccup. And for not asking stupid questions." She placed a hand on his upper arm, rubbing it lightly as she spoke and giving him a light squeeze before she walked away "Thank you." And with a small smile, she was gone.
She'd smiled. It was the first genuine smile he'd seen since the death. And he caused that! He couldn't help but feel happier in knowing that he made Astrid Hofferson smile.

Astrid felt a little better, somehow talking to Hiccup had helped ease the pain she was feeling. She'd not felt the pain ease once since she first got the news. She remembered it as clearly as if it had happened just yesterday.

_Astrid was sat at the breakfast bar in her kitchen trying to do her homework as she ate her dinner of microwave pizza. She hated chemistry. She could never get the equations right. She glanced

between her notes and the text book trying to figure out the answers. It was late and she was exhausted hardly able to focus but this was due in tomorrow so she had to finish it.

>She tried to maintain focus and succeeded for about another hour when there was a knock at the door. Half past midnight. Who would be calling at this time?! She wandered over to the door and peered through the grimy windows to check who was there. She was not dealing with another of her father's 'associates' . Through the grime she could make out fluorescent jackets with black and white checks on them. Cops. Great. What had her father done now? She opened the door with a heavy sigh.
"What's he done this time?"
"Are you Miss Hofferson?"
"Yes I am."
"Is your father not in?" It wasn't about him? This was unusual. She shook her head.
"No, he's out tonight. Why what's happened?"

>"Miss Hofferson, I'm afraid I come with really quite bad news."
"Oh no. Just, give it to me straight." The officer looked rather stunned by her casual attitude.
"Miss Hofferson, I'm here about your uncle." She felt her stomach sink. Her uncle? He never did anything against the law, in fact, he'd often talked about joining the police force, what could this be about?
"What about him?"
"There's no easy way to say this..."
"So just say it."
"Miss Hofferson, I'm afraid your uncle is dead."That. Right then. That was the moment that her heart snapped. She might have thought it was some sick joke if she hadn't seen the look on the officer's face. It was like someone had plunged an ice cold knife through her gut. She felt a sinking feeling, something cold and agonising as her heart ripped in two.
"Miss Hofferson is there any..."
"Just go... Please. I, I need to be alone."
"Miss Hofferson..."

>"Please! Go!" She yelled as the tears began burning. The officer looked even more shocked but he left as she requested. She shut the door and leaned against it, shaking. She turned and walked away, trying to keep it together. She made it as far as the table littered with chemistry homework before she screamed and broke down crying. She shoved everything to the floor and yelled as though she were being murdered. The pain was so excruciating she felt death might be kinder. Less painful. She screamed and cried until she could scream no more, and until the neighbours woke up and called the cops. It was pain like she'd never known and no one could ease it. No one understood. Astrid had never felt more alone.

The following weeks at school had been torture. She wouldn't let on much, but pitying eyes followed her everywhere. Her father was even more intolerable and even less of her work made sense. Of course her teachers let her off because of the emotional strain, but Astrid hated the pity. Because no one did understand. And even here, surrounded by people, Astrid felt alone.

2. Chapter 2 - Understanding

Time passed in the blink of an eye as it so often does. The year flashed past in a blur of essays and equations for Hiccup. With the occasional sight of Astrid and being tripped over in the corridors by

his cousin. The summer had hardly been much more fun. Hiccup was hardly a social butterfly so whilst everyone else was meeting up over the summer, partying and going to the beach, Hiccup stayed home alone doing rather less exciting things.

>That wasn't to say he spent the entire summer alone. Every now and then his Dad had an hour or two free and they'd sit in uncomfortable silence in front of the TV set. And Gobber would call round too sometimes or Hiccup would go visit him at the garage and learn how to fix car engines, it gave him a little extra cash. And on a few days Frederick Ingerman, or Fishlegs as he was always called, would call in and the two of them would chat and then complete the summer homework. Fishlegs was the only in the more popular circle who would give Hiccup the time of day. The inner circle was the pretty much the highest rank in the school, and they weren't even top of the school yet. But they were the elite, certainly of their year group.
The only other company Hiccup had had over the summer was his big secret. Hiccup had found and rescued an injured wolf over the summer. The young wolf had made himself quite at home with Hiccup, spending everyday with Hiccup. He even slept in the house when Hiccup's father wasn't around, otherwise, he stayed in an old hunting shack in the surrounding woodland. The wolf was surprisingly affectionate and playful, he liked to play fight but he never used his teeth, preferring instead to slobber Hiccup to submission. Somehow this led to him being called Toothless. Toothless certainly didn't mind the more domestic lifestyle he was experiencing; in fact he always looked annoyed at having to leave the luxuries of the house.

>Hiccup sighed as he thought of long walks with Toothless. He'd much rather be doing that then trying to maintain focus on his IT work. The school year had started up again about two weeks ago and for perhaps the first time ever, he'd not wanted to go back. He hadn't wanted to leave Toothless alone all day. He sighed again and opened a new webpage. The work was simple and Hiccup had already completed the assigned task, and the one for next week. So instead of sitting there bored he thought he might try to make use of his time. He looked at pages about prosthetic limbs and a particular group who specialised in limbs for animals, he looked at college courses, both in the sciences and engineering and he did a quick bit of research on wolves. He'd done a lot of research over the summer, but he couldn't have his dad seeing the vast amounts or he'd get suspicious. Not that he was ever home.
"I saw that photo with the marine boys... They are HOT! Can you hook me up?" Rachel 'Ruff' Thorston was asking Astrid in a loud whisper. Hiccup glanced up. He'd seen the photos too. Some of the young marines Astrid's uncle had trained had been visiting her over the summer. There had been a lot of photos of them with her, he sighed again.

>"Ruff would you shut it!" Astrid hissed back as she tried to finish the task but there was a small smile on her face.
"How about that tall dark haired guy? He's really cute, muscles and all. How about him?"

>"I am not setting you up with Eric!"
"Why not? Are you dating him?"

>"No! I am not!"
"Then why not?"

>"He's leaving in a month anyway Ruff."
"So what?"

>"Not going to happen"
"Please?"

>"Girls, less talking." Miss Ack said as she walked around checking on them all. Hiccup turned back to his own screen and looked up the marines and how to join.
"Oh come on." A voice whispered "You are not seriously thinking of joining the marines?" Hiccup glanced to his left to see Fishlegs peering at his screen, a look of despair on his face. "You'd never survive the training! That's assuming you even got

accepted!"

>"Thanks for the vote of confidence there Fish." Hiccup muttered as he closed the page, he'd check it in more detail at home, where there was no Fishlegs to judge him.
"You wouldn't! I'm not trying to be rude or anything, but I mean, look at you! You're basically a twig with a face! And not the tough kind like Groot! Just a twig, you've got no muscles, you have asthma... You'd die!"

>"Thank you, for summing that up."
"I'm just saying, there's no point in trying to get yourself killed just to impress her." Hiccup shot him a death glare. "It's clearly why you're looking at it! You're the least likely person to get into a fight ever! So it's obvious it's for her! It's not going to magically make her like you so I'm just saying..."

>"Alright class, save your work and log off please, that's the end of class." Hiccup closed everything and logged off, keen to get out of there before Fishlegs could carry on.
As soon as he was out of the door he ran towards his locker, grabbing his other books for the evening and his coat before hurrying out of the building as fast as he could. Much to his annoyance though, he had to reach for his inhaler once he'd left the building. Fishlegs was right, he'd never make it as a marine. And he was also right; Hiccup had only looked to impress Astrid. He sat down on a bench to catch his breath. He stood no chance with a girl like Astrid. He should just give up and accept that he either had to lower his sights, or stay a bachelor forever. He stood once more ready to walk home, maybe he'd go out with Toothless for a while. As he stood, he found himself right in the path of... Astrid.

>"Woah!" She exclaimed as she stopped just short of him. "Jeez, don't do that!"
"I err..."

>"I nearly walked right into you! You should check before you do that, if I'd been cycling or running, I'd have knocked you down!" Great, he thought, someone else thought he was weak and pathetic. "Just, look out next time yeah?" She said more softly. He tried to say something, even just sorry. But the words caught in his throat and made a strangled noise instead. "Hiccup, are you ok? Do you need your inhaler?" She asked and she genuinely looked worried. He shook his head and gestured to his inhaler in his other hand. "Oh ok, well, as long as you're alright..." He nodded "...I have to go, there's somewhere I have to be so I guess I'll see you." She walked away leaving Hiccup to kick the bench in frustration at his epic uselessness and then yelp as he hurt his toe.<p>

The sky was clouding over but it didn't rain. Autumn was definitely settling in now Hiccup decided as his feet crunched over the first few fallen leaves. He had a small bunch of flowers griped in his fist. He needed advice, help. The only person he knew to ask, he hadn't been to see for a long time, far longer than he was proud to admit so flowers seemed appropriate. He stopped when he reached his destination and gave a small weak smile as he kneeled down to wipe the dirt from the stone.

>"Hi Mum." He said quietly placing the flowers on her grave. "I'm sorry it's been so long, I guess I hate visiting, because I hate remembering that you're gone, that you're here. But Mum, I really need your advice."<p>

Hiccup was walking back about half an hour later. He tugged his coat

tighter around his shoulders as a brisk autumn breeze blew through the cemetery. He may not have got answers, but he felt better in himself for visiting. Even with Finn dying, he'd not visited his mother's grave. He hated visiting, it was always painful.

>"I guess I still can't quite get my head around the fact that you're not here anymore. I know it's been five months, but it still feels wrong. I keep expecting you to walk through the door at any minute. But I know you won't." Hiccup stopped in his tracks and looked across to where the voice had come from.
"I really miss you Uncle Finn." She sniffed. "I'll come see you again soon, I promise. Ok, I love you. Bye" She got up and turned around to leave wiping her eyes. "Hiccup!" She exclaimed suddenly as she noticed him. "Wha, what are you doing here?"

>"Visiting Mum."
"Oh... Oh Hiccup I'm sorry, I'd forgotten she was here too." She said and Hiccup had to look away, he could see tears in her eyes and somehow it seemed indecent to look at her like that.

>"It's ok; you've had a lot on your mind." He shrugged, he couldn't believe it, he was talking to her! He was opening his mouth and words were coming out!
"C...Can I ask you something?" She asked, her voice was cracking but he forced himself to look at her as he nodded.

>"Sure."
"Does the pain ever stop?" She asked as tears began falling. "Does it ever go away? Does it ever get any easier? Because I don't think I can carry on like this." He didn't mean to stare as she cried in front of him, her voice breaking with every word but he couldn't help it. This was Astrid Hofferson the strongest girl he'd ever known. He didn't know how to react to her; did he pat her shoulder or hug her or what? He wiped a tear from her face and was surprised she didn't hit him.

>"No, the pain never goes away. But it gets easier to manage over time, so it seems to hurt less. It's always the first of everything that hurts the most, if you can get through that, you'll get through everything." He said quietly.
"I just, I can't get used to the idea he's not going to be there. He won't see me graduate or anything."

>"I know, Mum wasn't there when I started high school, and she won't be there at the end." He spoke gently and then took a deep breath and sighed. "But they will be there, in their own way. Dad always told me, Mum would never miss anything important, she'd be there, I just wouldn't be able to see her." She looked at him. Her eyes looked insanely blue through the tears. She was beautiful despite the sadness. "It'll be the same for you. Your uncle would never miss any of those special events. You just won't see him. But you'll know he's there." Astrid's lower lip trembled as she looked at him. Then, she smiled. She smiled! He made her smile! She was still crying, but at least there was a smile on her face now.
"I guess you must really miss her."

>"Yeah, sometimes I miss her more than others. It's not so bad anymore. I guess I always went with if I didn't remember, it couldn't hurt."
"Whereas I just try and force a smile and grin through the pain. I've never felt more hurt or broken. It's so hard to stay strong."

>"You don't have to be so strong Astrid, you're allowed to hurt."
"I guess I'm too afraid to let my guard down." She said as she wiped her own eyes. "Did you just come to see your Mum or did you really miss her suddenly?"

>"I err..." He scratched the back of his neck awkwardly. "I actually came to ask her for her advice."
"Did she help?" He appreciated her not mocking him

>"She didn't really say much."
"I've found that too, Uncle Finn doesn't say much either." She smiled, she was trying to joke, to laugh with him. How was this happening? "What advice did you need from her that you couldn't get from your Dad?" Now he felt cornered. He felt heat rise in his cheeks and he started walking still rubbing his neck embarrassed. "Are you blushing?! Hiccup!" She hurried after him "What did you ask that your Dad can't help with?! Are you secretly a woman?" She asked in a teasing manner

>"No but thanks for making it clear how you think of me." He said, a slight laugh in his tone.
"Just checking! It might make a few things confusing for me!" Now it was his turn to look surprised as she blushed a delicate pink.

>"What things?"
"Oh no, nuh uh. No way Haddock. If you're not saying I'm not saying."

>"But mine is embarrassing!"
"And mine is! At least, it's going to be embarrassing situation. I'm too shy to say!" She said blushing more. "And now I'm more embarrassed!"

>"You, shy? Yeah right!"
"I'll make you a deal," She said as they approached the gate at the cemetery exit. "You tell me what you came to ask your Mum's advice on, and I'll tell you what things." She smiled at him and then raised an eyebrow and holding out her hand for him to shake. He eyed her suspiciously before shaking.

>"Fine, but you can't repeat it to ANYONE. Understood?"
"Likewise."

>"Ok, since you must know... I came to ask Mum how to talk to girls."
"Does your Dad not know that?" She was fighting back a smirk. "I'd have thought he could have helped."

>"My Dad was very different to me at my age, Mum was more like me. He'd never understand how difficult I find it to talk to girls, well to talk to you." Astrid's grin vanished and she stared at him.
"That's what you were asking? How to talk to me?" He nodded and looked at his feet. "Hiccup," she said softly shaking her head lightly "You shouldn't need to ask how to talk to me. You can just talk to me, you know, like a normal person? Just say hello."

>"But I couldn't even do that. I'd just stumble over my words or choke on them."
"Wait, that's what happened earlier isn't it? When I nearly crashed into you?" Again he nodded embarrassed. To his surprise, or maybe not, she laughed. But it wasn't mocking laughter, it was, happy, amused. "I guess your Mum heard you then."

>"What do you mean?"
"Well, you're talking to me aren't you?" She was smiling again, he looked up and stared.

>"Well yeah..."
"So she heard you then. Like you said, they're always there, we just don't see them. I guess they answer even if we can't hear them too."

>"I guess so." He smiled back at her. "Thanks for not mocking me."
"Why would I do that?" She looked genuinely confused as to why she would.

>"Because it's weird."
"Of course it's not. As someone who's recently lost someone they love, trust me, it's not weird to talk to them."

>"Well, thanks."
"You're welcome Hiccup."

>"Now, those 'things'!"
"Oh damn I hoped I'd get away with it!" She laughed lightly. "I guess, I'd have been pretty disappointed if you were a girl. I think you're the nicest guy I've met. Can't have the one decent guy turn out to be a girl!" She laughed. Hiccup laughed too but part of him felt a little disappointed.

>"Well rest assured, I'm a guy."
"Good."

>"So no confusion."
"Yeah. It'd have made life a little more confusing if you were a girl. I didn't think I thought girls were cute." She said glancing away, her cheeks turning pink again.

>"You, you think I'm cute?" He wasn't sure if it was a good thing to be seen as cute or not.
"Yeah, kind of. I mean, in a good way. You're sweet and caring. Uncle Finn always used to say you were a good guy."

>"He... he did?"
"Yeah." She laughed lightly. "Uncle Finn always thought you'd go far, even when Snot would push you over and laugh." Snot was the nickname given to Hiccup's cousin Scott Jorgenson. Everyone called him Snotlout, Hiccup didn't know why but it was an effective chant at football matches. "He said 'mark my words, one day that boy will best them all' He really liked you."

>"I remember," Hiccup said with a smile "he'd always come help me up when they pushed me over. Then he'd tell me not to worry because Scott just did it because he was jealous that I could outsmart him. He said in the marines, the brawns only go so far, because they need more brain than brawn. He said I'd go further than Scott because I had the brains."
"He was right wasn't he?" She laughed. "You're top of the year! You're doing extra classes on the side and top colleges are already asking after you!" Hiccup raised an eyebrow again "Ms Hildegard mentioned it to Mr Hoark when I was in detention." She said sheepishly shrugging.

>"Well, I'm not thinking about it too much yet. I have to decide where I want to go first."
"Well whatever way you go, you'll go far I think."

>"Thanks Astrid."
"You're welcome Hiccup." She suddenly looked shocked. "I mean Hugo!"

>"It's ok" He laughed. "I've grown used to it. I don't mind. It'll make a change for someone to call me Hiccup and not be mocking."
"Are you sure you don't mind?"

>"It's ok Astrid, really it is." She bit her lip and then glanced to the skies where the clouds were thickening. She tugged her thin jacket tighter around her.
"We should probably head back before the rain comes down."

>"Yeah, might be an idea. You want company on the way back?" He felt surprised at himself. "I mean, I walk past your road anyway so I just thought that, you know, if you wanted..."
"Hiccup," She held a hand to his mouth to stop his babbling and smiled. "I'd like that. Company would be nice. Plus, I think you can walk more than three paces without flexing your muscles and using a cheesy pick up line."

>"Damn I thought I'd try that one now." She laughed as they began walking. They talked a little more but stopped suddenly when they felt the first drop of rain. It hit Astrid's cheek and rolled like a tear and Hiccup couldn't stop himself wiping it away. For a moment they just looked at each other, then slowly their eyes moved skywards as the rain began to pour in heavy drops.
"Oh!" They gasped as it soaked them in seconds. In Berk the weather went from heavy rain and thunderstorms in the autumn and early winter, to thick blankets of snow for the rest of winter. Then there was just showers and spattering of sunlight in spring and often gorgeous sun mixed with heavy downpours in summer.

>"Quick!" Hiccup said as they began running down the streets.
"It's ok, its not far now, I can make it on my own if you want to call a cab or something. You live miles out!"

>"I'll manage, come on, you're soaked already!" After a few minutes they arrived outside Astrid's front door where they were slightly sheltered by the porch. "Well, bye then."
"Bye," he turned to leave "Hey Hiccup!" He turned back "Thank you." He smiled at her through the rain.

>"You're welcome Astrid. Goodbye." And Hiccup hurried off down the

street tugging his already soaked coat over his dripping head. He really should call for a car he thought.<p>

3. Chapter 3 - Family 1

"Yer soaked lad."

>"Hi to you too Gobber." Hiccup said shaking out his dripping head as he walked in.
"Ya coulda phoned lad, I'd have picked ya up."

>"Thanks, I'll remember that in future." He sighed as he dripped over the hardwood floors heading for the dry room at the back of the house.
"Just go round the back, ya father'll kill ya if you wreck those floors."

>"I'm wet enough already thanks."
"Now, lad." Groaning Hiccup went back outside and walked to the back of the large house. Once inside he simply tugged his drenched clothes off, ringing them out and shoving them into the washing machine. He tugged one the towels from the rail and wrapped it around himself.

>"Gobber, I'mma take a shower. Is there food?"
"Nah, not yet lad."

>"Did you order in again?"
"Nah was waiting for you."

>"Thanks." Hiccup said sarcastically heading up the stairs.<p>

One steaming shower later and Hiccup came downstairs to make food for dinner.

>"Are we expecting dad back for dinner?"
"Nah, he has to stay late at the office he said" Gobber told him, flicking through the channels on the TV.

>"No surprises there." Hiccup sighed. "He's never here."
"Ach, now lad, your dad does what he can to be here..."

>"But he never is Gobber, and when he is we don't talk. He doesn't know me. At all." It was true that whilst his relationship with his father was not a bad relationship, there was little shared between them. His father was incredibly different to him and so they often found communication difficult and had very little to talk about.
"That's not true lad..."

>"It is Gobber, you know more about me than he does. I know he doesn't mean to never see me, but it has an effect. Mum's gone and Dad is never here. Who does that leave me with?"
"You've got me lad."

>"I know Gobber, and I'm glad I have you..."
"...But you still wish ya had them too."

>"Yeah." Hiccup said sighing. He wandered into the kitchen and began making dinner; he didn't really feel like doing much. He wanted to curl up with Toothless, but Gobber was here so that wasn't going to happen. He dragged his water-logged bag into the kitchen and stuck it in the sink and began pulling out his books. Fortunately they weren't too wet, just a little at the edges of the pages. He laid them out on the breakfast bar so they could dry and started making dinner. It was a typical pattern. He came home, did a couple of hours work, made dinner either just for himself or sometimes Gobber too, and about once every couple of weeks for his dad too, did some more homework and then went to bed. These days, he'd interval it with going out to see Toothless. But that wasn't a problem. Hiccup was indeed top of his class and homework generally didn't take him too long to complete, he did do extra work on top for his side classes. Hiccup planned to go far in life and this was his start point. All the extra work contributed to getting extra points for college. He knew the top colleges were asking after him. There were already a dozen letters

and prospectuses stashed away in his room. His father of course, wanted him to go to Yale, or Harvard or Stanford but Hiccup didn't seem so keen. Hiccup had not even made up his mind what he wanted to do with his future, he knew it probably lay in the sciences, but he'd yet to decide what aspect.
Toothless had actually got him thinking more seriously about his future. Toothless had a leg missing. After Hiccup rescued him, he'd called a vet to try and fix his injured leg but she'd been forced to amputate it. Hiccup had paid her well to do the job and insisted that he had someone from a sanctuary coming for the wolf. This of course was a lie. But it was this that started Hiccup looking into veterinary practice and from there he found out about prosthetics and animal prosthetics. The idea of combining the skills he had in engineering, or so Gobber told him, with biology to help animals like Toothless had appealed to him. But he was only fifteen. He didn't need to worry too much just yet. Nothing was set in stone, his future was still wide open.

>"Gobber! Food's done!" Hiccup called and the bigger man came bumbling in. Gobber had two prosthetic limbs, an arm and a leg. He lost them both in an accident at work years ago. It hadn't stopped Gobber running a motor garage a year after he lost them. He got advanced prosthetics that would act like normal and continued to function normally. Hiccup had enquired about them recently, he knew his father had helped pay for the limbs. Gobber being an old family friend, Gerard had been only too happy to help.
"Ah, thanks Hiccup... Ach, I mean Hugo." Hiccup rolled his eyes.

>"No worries Gobber, everyone calls me that. I don't mind. Listen would you mind putting the dishes in the dishwasher for me? I've got some homework to do."
"How come ye were late back anyways lad?"

>"I went to see Mum." He said quietly. Gobber stopped and looked at him.
"Ah, I see. Well you go git on with ye work. I'll put this lot away alright?"

>"Thanks Gobber, I appreciate it."
"Listen lad, I know it's not bin easy what with yer dad working all hours under the sun and yer mum not being here, but if you ever need ta talk..."

>"I know Gobber,"
"Or if you wanna go see her, or need fetching..."

>"Gobber," Hiccup placed a hand on his elbow, "I know, thank you. Thanks for being the other parent in my life." Gobber gave a grunt in response and nodded.
"Yer dad's a great guy Hugo, and I ain't saying nothing against him, but he doesn't always prioritise right. Yer Mum wouldn'ta stood for it. And I know he misses her as much as ya do, but he don't always show it."

>"Nor do I Gobber, I keep it all hidden."
"You've always bin a good kid, always had potential. Yer mum was a saint, yer dad was the hero. I always promised 'em both I'd take care of you if may the gods forbid, they couldn't. Yer Mum loved ya, she always wanted what was best fer ya. And I promised her I'd get ya there. She knew yer dad wouldn't always know what was best, but she asked me to try and help out there."

>"I know Gobber, you promised her you'd take care of us both." Hiccup sighed, he'd heard the story before.
"Nah, lad. I promised her I'd watch over yer dad. I promised her I'd take good care of you. She always said, 'Gerard's grown up, he's set in his ways and I love him, but you can't let Hugo grow up to be like that. It's not fer him. Promise me Craig, promise me, no matter what he chooses, you'll help him and encourage and support him in it. Cos his dad won't never understand.'" Gobber said finally. Hiccup stared for a moment longer, so his mum had always known? She'd always known he was different? But what had she wanted? Would she be proud of him? "So whatever it is

you ain't saying right now, I hope you'll say in time, because I'll be damned if I'm going to invoke yer mother's wrath. She'll come back from the grave if I break me promise." He gave a sort of smile and Hiccup smiled back. Gobber always had been there, even if he didn't always understand completely, he always tried. Certainly more than Hiccup's dad did. He knew he was lucky, he didn't just have one dad who loved him, even if he didn't understand him, he had another, because he knew Gobber loved him just as much as any parent, even if he never said it. Gobber clapped his shoulder, once more sending him stumbling forwards and the two went their own directions.

4. Chapter 4 - Help

****This chapter will include the first Astrid PoV as well. Hope you like this one****

A week later Hiccup was trudging back through the rain. His clothes were soaked through, his shoulder strap on his bag had torn and half his books were mangled. He had one shoe missing and his coat had been slashed and torn. He was a sorry sight.

>Hiccup let out a long sigh. He really hated his cousin sometimes. Scott had cornered him after school and began his favourite sport of Hiccup Hunting. Him and a couple of his mates had taken his bag, destroyed it and tipped out half the contents, tugged his coat and ripped it, stolen his left shoe and shoved him into the ground and beat the shit out of him laughing in the rain. It wasn't like he could even tell the truth about what had happened because Scott was his cousin and for one thing, his Dad wouldn't believe it, for another he'd come out even worse if he tried. It was better he just stayed quiet and let it go. He should probably call Gobber, or for a car to fetch him, but then he'd have to explain his current state and he really didn't feel much like doing that. It had been a long day and all he'd wanted was to come home and see Toothless, probably give him a bath because he was starting to stink. That would probably take most the evening and result in him being as soaked as Toothless. It seemed unlikely now. He was soaked already and not the good warm soapy bath water kind of soaked.
"Hiccup?" A voice said from somewhere on his right. He froze and turned his dripping head to look towards the voice slowly. Astrid... Great. Of all the people in his school, in this city, it had to be Astrid. It had to be the most gorgeous girl in the city who saw him sopping wet fresh from one of Scott's beatings. The world had to be just that cruel didn't it. "Oh gods what happened to you?! You're soaked! Have you called for a car?" He slumped. He must look even more pathetic than usual. Why could he not run into her, for once, when he looked impressive or heroic or masculine as opposed to, well, a drowned runt of a rat?

>"Errr no."
"What?! Hiccup you are drenched! You cannot walk home like this you only have one shoe! YOU ONLY HAVE ONE SHOE!? Hiccup, what in Hell's name happened?!" She asked standing in front of him and staring horrified.

>"I um..."
"Hiccup, who decked you?"

>"What, n... n...no no one." He stuttered.
"Hiccup, I can see the bruise staring to swell under your eye. Who decked you?"

>"No one."
"Hiccup, don't lie to me. Who did this to you?"

>"N..n...n...no one." Now he was stuttering because he was shivering.
"You're lying and you're freezing. Come on, we've got to get you someplace warm."

>"Nnnn no I'm fffine." He shivered.
"Hiccup don't be ridiculous. Come on, there's a coffee shop in the next street, let's go there and we'll call you a car."

>"Nnnno I dddon't nnneed a cccar."
"Yeah course you don't" She said rolling her eyes and helping him over to the next street. Gods he was pathetic. He couldn't even stop Astrid dragging him into a coffee shop. Normally, this would be a dream come true, going to a coffee shop with Astrid, but under these circumstances, he was less than thrilled.

>"What are you drinking?" She asked pushing him down into a chair. A few people stared as they entered.
"Nnnnothing I'm fffine."

>"Liar. I'll get you a hot chocolate." He slouched in the chair as she walked away. You couldn't argue with that girl, he loved that but hated it. He sat there dripping onto the floor for a couple of minutes before Astrid reappeared with a steaming mug of hot chocolate and a kitchen towel.
"The waitress gave me this so you can dry off a little bit. Drink this, you've got to warm up." Still shivering he accepted the steaming mug, cupping it with both hands trying to get some feeling back into his numb fingers. He didn't notice Astrid's small smile as she walked around to stand behind him, dropping the towel over his head and rubbing his hair lightly.

"Hhey!" He stuttered in protest.

>"What? Someone had to dry this shaggy mess you call hair!" She teased.
"I'll have you knnnow this hairdo takes hours!" He joked back. He was joking with her? Impossible.

>"Oh haha. Funny." She took the towel back and he looked up at her. Her eyes were sympathetic but searching. She seemed to be trying to read his mind.
"Wha...what?"

>"I'm trying to work out why you won't tell me which scumbags beat the shit out of you." He looked away and she moved to sit in the seat opposite him, reaching out to place her hands over his own. He suddenly felt like his whole body was on fire and it began where her hands touched his. "Hiccup, I know someone beat you up. Just talk to me."
"It's nothing. I don't want to make things worse." He mumbled looking down.

>"Make matters worse? Hiccup, you're going to end up with a black eye and bruises god knows where else! Why do you defend them?"
"I'm not defending them..."

>"Then tell me who did it!"
"No, I'm pathetic, but I'm not going to stoop so low as to get you to fix my problems for me."

>"Then fix them yourself!"
"Nothing to fix!"

>"Hiccup..."
"No, Astrid, there's nothing to be done."

>"Well if you won't tell me..."
"Which I won't"

>"Will you let me help you instead?"
"What?"

>"Will you let me help you?"
"H...how?"

>"I'll teach you how to defend yourself enough to be able to run, or throw a punch or something so Scott can't beat you up so easily."
"How did you kno..."

>"Because you won't tell me, you think it makes it worse to tell... Plus, he's always trying to trip you or something. It was a pretty good guess to make."
"Well yeah."

>"Hiccup..." She sighed and he looked up at her.
"Thanks for the offer, but I'll be fine." He wasn't sure why he was turning down her offer, not only might it help him but it would mean he would be able to spend time alone with her. Maybe he just didn't want to prove just how pathetic and weak he really was.

>"Hiccup, I'm just trying to..."
"I know, but I'll be fine Astrid"

really." She looked doubtful which if anything made him feel worse. "Seriously, I can handle Scott. Brains over brawn remember?" He said offering her a lopsided smile. It was somewhat forced but still. She smiled back at him.

>"If you say so Hiccup. But I'm still calling a car for you."
"No no that's..." She dialled despite his protests. The car arrived about fifteen minutes later to collect him. "Well erm... Thanks... I guess."

>"You're welcome. And if you need anything, even just someone to talk to, you can come to me ok?" Hiccup nodded weakly as he left. Astrid Hofferson had offered to help him. Maybe today wasn't so bad.<p>

"Hiccup, Hiccup." Was someone calling his name? He wasn't sure. "Hiccup? Hey, Hiccup!" He blinked and looked to his right to where Fishlegs was jabbing him with a pen incessantly.

>"Oh, what's up Fish?"
"What's up with you?"

>"What do you mean?"
"You're less focussed than normal. It's maths. You're always focussed in maths."

>"I am focussed..."
"What's the question Miss just asked?"

>"Errr..."
"Exactly, what's with you?"

>"Nothing, just a little distracted is all."
"By what, Astrid isn't in front of you..."

>"Shush!" He said glancing around frantically and waving his arms to try and shut Fishlegs up.
"Oh come on she isn't going to hear or care."

>"She might!"
"She isn't going to care!"

>"Class dismissed!" Hiccup practically jumped out of his seat but Fishlegs wasn't going to give up that easily.
"You didn't do half the problems, what had you so distracted? And don't say..."

>"Hey Hiccup can I talk to you?" Both boys froze as Astrid appeared and spoke to him.
"Errr... Sure."

>"Thanks," She pulled him to one side leaving Fishlegs looking completely dumbstruck.
"So erm... what, what did you want?"

>"Well, I'd never usually ask but..."
"Sure. Anything." He said straight away. She smiled at him.

>"Why don't you let me finish first?"
"Oh right, yeah sure, go ahead."

>"Well, like I said, I'd usually never even admit to this but, I'm struggling with the maths and sciences. And well, you seem to really get it. I was just wondering if well, if maybe, maybe you'd consider tutoring me?" She asked him bashfully scuffing her boot on the floor with her hands behind her back staring down at her feet, a singular section of hair falling down in front of her face. Hiccup had to fight every urge to brush it back from her face.
"Yeah, yeah of course I will. Are you free tonight?"

>"Erm... Yeah. I have training tomorrow night."
"Is that a one off?"

>"No, every week."
"Ok so we can meet on a Thursday every week if you want."

>"Really? You'd do that for me?"
"Yeah sure."

>"Hiccup, thank you so much. You have no idea how much I appreciate this."
"Do you want to meet at your house?"

>"Oh, no. No not at my place. My Dad is really funny about stuff. He hates people being round. Can we do it at your place instead?"
"Yeah no problem. Dad is never there anyway so that's not a problem." He smiled weakly.

>"Thank you so much Hiccup. So where shall I meet you?"
"Ermm...

Do you just want to meet at the gates?"
>"Sure. So I'll see you there after school?"
"Ok... Oh umm... How, how long do you think you'll be there?"
>"Oh do you have something else on?"
"No, I was just thinking about whether to order takeout."
>"Takeout sounds good. Oh, there's a totally crap movie on tonight. We could do some studying and then have take out and watch the movie if you want?" Hiccup spluttered incoherently. That sounded like a date. Was that what she was suggesting?
"Err y...yeah sure."

>"Ok great. So I'll see you at the school gates at three thirty then." She flashed him another brilliant smile and left, he collapsed against the wall and tried to catch his breath and work out what the hell had just happened.<p>

>Hiccup stood nervously at the school gates checking his battered watch every ten seconds. The watch face was slightly cracked and somehow the minute hand was crooked, the strap had fallen to pieces several times and even the new strap was wearing thin. It had once belonged to his grandfather on his mother's side. Hiccup hardly remembered him, but he did recall calling him 'old wrinkly' because he was, well, old and wrinkly. It was three thirty seven, and forty two seconds if Hiccup was counting right. Where was she? Had she decided she didn't want to be seen with him? Or was this always the plan? To leave him standing here like an idiot? He started feeling more and more nervous. He'd be so stupid to think she'd actually want to be seen with him, that she could actually want his help. He was such an idiot!
How could he have thought even for a nanosecond that he might have a chance to spend time alone with ASTRID HOFFERSON?! For the love of... She was Astrid Hofferson! Most popular girl in the year, pretty much in the school, in the city! What chance did he really stand? He might be son of the mayor, but he was still just a lonely little nerd. Just a geek. A geek with a name, money and no friends. But he'd never minded much before, he just had Fishlegs and that was fine. But the possibility of being able to be alone with Astrid... that was a dream he'd longed to fulfil since he could talk. Hiccup snorted at his own stupidity and kicked the gate, once again stubbing his left foot. He tugged his satchel tighter and turned to start walking home, sulking and muttering to himself about how stupid he'd been. He'd walked about seven paces when someone called out to him.

>"Hiccup?" He froze on the spot, hardly daring to believe his ears. Could that be the heavenly sound of Astrid Hofferson calling out to him? "Hiccup, are... are you going without me? I thought we were meeting up..." He turned slowly on the spot and looked up from the ground, eyes moving from her boots to her blue leggings, to her skirt, to her leather jacket, up the gentle slope of her neck to her pink lips currently dropped into a slightly surprised and hurt look and up to her bright blue eyes that looked at him questioning and hurt. Hiccup felt ashamed.
"Oh... umm sorry... I errr..."

>"If you don't want to you could have just said." She snapped, back to her usual strong and tough self, but as he looked into her eyes he saw past the angry tone.
"No Astrid, it's not that! Really! Trust me! I just thought that..."

>"What that I wouldn't want to? That I was just messing around when I asked for your help? That I just wanted to make you look a fool by making you wait and never turning up?"
"Well... Yeah, kind of."

>"I was late getting out because Mr Hoark wanted to talk to me. I did not decide to try and humiliate you!" She did look angry now and Hiccup found his words catching in his throat again.
"I'm... I'm... ssssorry... I just..."
>"Do you know what, forget it Hiccup. Maybe you aren't as different as I thought you were."
"Wwwhat?"
>"I didn't think you thought I was like that. I didn't think you thought I was like the rest of them. I didn't think you were. But you don't get it. I thought you understood! I thought you... Eurgh! Forget it!" She huffed and stormed away from him. For a moment, Hiccup was frozen to the spot and a few people were staring, mostly in disbelief he expected, then by some miracle, he managed to force his legs to move and he ran after her.
"Astrid!" He called out as he ran after her, stumbling half the time.

She felt such a fool. She'd honestly believed he'd want to help her. That he understood. She'd never asked for help with anything, ever! But with everything else going on in her life, she felt this was the one thing she could have some control over, something she might just be able to accept help with. It was all anyone could help with anyway.

>She'd thought Hiccup was different. He always seemed so sweet, so quiet and understanding. You only had to look into his eyes once to know that he was understanding, sympathetic and caring. He never looked at anyone with loathing or hate, not even when people were laughing at him or beating him up. Her uncle had always said he was a good guy. And she'd trusted that. He'd seemed so sweet and kind after the funeral. He'd understood her pain; he knew her sorrow in the cemetery. He'd been such a gentleman walking her home even in the rain. She thought it was something they shared, something he knew and understood. That he was someone she could relate to. Someone she could trust. To rely on. But apparently not.
He'd thought she considered herself above him. He thought she'd just been trying to make him look a fool. To hurt him. He really believed she would do that to him. For some reason, it hurt her more than she thought it would.

>"Astrid! Hey Astrid! W...Wait up!" She heard him call out as he ran after her. That did surprise her. Hiccup never ran, and he certainly never ran after her, or called out to her or anything to her really. She stopped mostly out of surprise, partly because she knew if he kept running without taking a puff from his inhaler he'd probably collapse.
"Astrid...Hi...Listen..." He panted fumbling in his bag for his inhaler and taking a puff. He stayed silent for a moment and she stood with a hand on her hip looking at him with a raise eyebrow. "Astrid... I didn't mean... I might have thought, but only because well... You're... You're you... And I'm... I'm just... I'm just a hiccup. Just a useless hiccup."
>"You're not a useless hiccup Hugo."
"You called me Hugo."

>"Yeah... It sounds weird to me."
"Yeah, it kind of does to me too." He gave her a weak smile. "Listen I'm... I'm sorry that I jumped to conclusions..."
>"Just forget it Hiccup."
"No, I said I was going to help you, and I intend to do just that."
>"Hiccup, honestly don't worry."
"No, I said I'd help. Plus, I thought we were going to order take out and watch a crap movie?"

>"Yeah..."
"Then where are you going?"
>"Hiccup..."
"Come on, I thought we had a plan. This was going to

be a weekly thing?"

>"What movie and take out?"
"That too if you want."

>"Really? Studying and then takeout and a movie every Thursday?

Sounds like a pretty sweet deal actually."
"So what do you say?

Forgive me for being an idiotic nerd? Please?" He blinked at her, trying to do some sort of puppy eyes. It only half worked but Astrid felt her gaze softening as she smiled lightly at him.

>"Alright, I'll forgive you."
"Yay!" He laughed. "And I hope I can prove that I'm not like the others... Because I don't want you to think I'm like that."

>"It's ok Hiccup, I don't. Not really. I was just... annoyed. I'm sorry, can we just forget the whole thing?"
"It's forgotten." He smiled. "Shall we?" Somehow she laughed and shaking her head she walked with him. There was something about Hiccup that she just couldn't put her finger on. But she liked him. Not in that cliché rom-com movie way where the girl falls for the geek and they live happily ever after, but in that 'you're actually pretty cool and I don't mind spending time with you' kind of way. It took them a while to walk to Hiccup's since they lived right on the edge of the city, but it didn't feel too long. They were busy talking and laughing, something they'd never done before.

Hiccup could hardly believe this was actually happening. He was walking, talking and laughing with Astrid Hofferson as they walked back to his place! This was amazing! He'd never have thought in his lifetime this would ever happen. Not to him anyway. Probably to some jock like sportsman who could afford to spoil her and give her glory and have glory of his own. Some guy who was macho and impressive and heroic and brilliant. Maybe a marine or something. So he savoured her every word, her every smile and her every laugh. Everything was going amazingly well. It just seemed too good to be true!

>"Wow! This place is amazing Hiccup!"
"What? Oh... Yeah, it does look pretty impressive but it's just a big empty house really."

>"I can't believe this is your house! It's huge, and beautiful and you have those huge grounds!"
"No, my dad does. I just live here."

>"Oh come on Hiccup! It's your home too!"
"Yeah, sure." He laughed weakly as he unlocked the front door, pushing it open for her to enter the house.

>"Thank you Hiccup."
"You're welcome"

>"Wow! Hardwood floors! I feel so lowerclass!"
"Oh come off it!"

>"I'm serious! This place is stunning! I'd best take off my shoes, I wouldn't want to scratch the floors!"
"Yeah dad doesn't like that especially." He grinned.

>"I can imagine! So how big are the grounds?"
"Oh a couple of acres?"

>"Really?! Do you get much wildlife?"
"Yeah, loads. Big birds of prey, the usual rabbits and deer and stuff. Oh and wolves. Every now and then you hear them howling in the woods. But not so much anymore. Dad had traps laid out for them."

>"I'm not surprised! I mean, wolves are aggressive and dangerous! Imagine if one got close to the house! It would be an enormous risk! They're killers! Lethal! They're monsters! They... Oh my Gods they're in here!" Hiccup froze. Sure enough a huge black creature was stalking towards them, slightly lopsidedly, but his bared teeth probably drew attention away from that...
Great... Hiccup thought. Just great.

5. Chapter 5 - Bruises

It all happened in something of a flash. The black wolf stalked ever closer, teeth bared in a menacing grimace of hate. It was a look Hiccup remembered well. Except when he'd seen that look, there had been sadness, pain and desperation in the wolf's green eyes as well. Now he just looked mad. Astrid was shoving him back and babbling something incoherent at him. It took him a moment to realise she was afraid.

>And he could understand why. Toothless was staring at her and growling. Even with the missing hind limb, he was still an imposing image. All black long shaggy fur, with a long snout tipped with a wet nose. His white teeth were bared into a snarl and he stepped one single huge black paw forwards in a threatening manner. His black tail was held high, a mark of an alpha, Hiccup had read alpha's held their tails higher than the other pack members. Hiccup could see why Astrid was frightened. Any normal person would be. The snarling, the bared teeth, the high tail... He was asserting his dominance and this newcomer was less than welcome. Hiccup grabbed Astrid's arms and pulled her behind him.
"Hiccup no!" She cried but he didn't pay attention.

>"Hey, easy. It's alright bud. It's alright, she's a friend." He assured the wolf, Toothless' expression softened at the sight of him. Hiccup smiled. "You just scared him is all"
"I scared him?! Who is him?" She asked, her voice getting higher with panic.

>"Astrid, Toothless. Toothless, Astrid." The wolf snarled at her again. "Hey, be nice Toothless...Astrid... Astrid?" She was backing up towards the door. Hiccup rolled his eyes and walked calmly after her.
"No! No get away from me! That thing is a monster! And you... you talk to it like... like..." She shrieked trying to get away from him. Hiccup smiled and reached out to grab her hand.

>"He's not a monster. Let me explain, please Astrid."
"I am not listening! He, it... is a monster!"

>"No he's not!" Hiccup snapped, perhaps more harshly than he'd intended. "Look at him!" He said pointing, one hand still holding her wrist.
"I see a wolf! A vicious beast!"

>"No, look!" He snapped again. "He has no foot! He's missing a leg!" She went quiet for a second as she looked. "He lost that to a trap. A trap laid by humans."
"Because he was in our territory!"

>"No! It's his home as much as ours!"
"Hiccup..."

>"No, listen. The wolves were here long before we were. They lived in the forest, simply hunting the local wildlife. It's not like my dad keeps cattle or anything here. They just exist here. Yet we struck first and made sport of killing them. Toothless very well may be the last wolf in the area. And why was he here then you ask? He's a young male. He was probably rejected by the alpha. He came here for sanctuary, and what happened? He got trapped."
"He's still a wild animal..."

>"So what? Does that make him the enemy?"
"They're killers!"

>"Did you learn nothing from your uncle?!" He exclaimed. She froze and stared at him in shock. "He once taught me that just because something is different, just because it could be a threat, does not make it's life worth any less than my own." He looked hard at her. "Your uncle told me that he never killed in war if he could help it. Because he didn't go there to kill the enemy. He went there to do the same as they were. To protect what he loved and stand up for what he believed was right."
"But this is..."

>"Different? Yeah, in a way. But if a human mother feels her child is threatened she protects them. It's no different with a wolf. We kill

them because we're afraid. But they're afraid too. I learned that when I saw Toothless in that trap. Even though he growled at me, even with his teeth bared, I saw in his eyes he was as frightened of me as I was of him. I looked at him, and I saw myself."
"But Hiccup..."

>"Let me show you. Please?" He looked at her pleadingly, still holding her wrist which was held up defensively over her chest. Slowly, cautiously, she lowered her hand and let him lead her forwards. "Thank you. Make your hand into a fist; let him sniff you, to get your scent." She did as he said, he then crouched slightly and Toothless nuzzled his face. "Get down to my level to let him know you respect him. You acknowledge that this is his home and that he therefore is the alpha. Let him know you're not a challenger or a threat." Hiccup said softly. Very nervously, she crouched down beside him, her breathing heavy and shaky as she stared at Toothless. Toothless growled for a moment longer, his eyes fixed on her, searching and uncertain. Judging if she was safe. Then he ceased in his aggression and took another unsteady step forwards, pressing his nose to her hand, sniffing it before making his decision and rubbing his furry face against her hand. Hiccup saw her visibly relax.
"See I told you he was safe." He said with a smile as the wolf stepped nearer to her, bumping her arm wanting attention. Astrid laughed nervously and obliged, scratching him behind his pointed ears and smoothing the fur on his back.

>"I can't believe this... This is... Insane. Amazing, but insane." She breathed sinking to her knees so she was more stable as Toothless offered her one of his very silly expressions in which he rolled out his bright pink tongue and looked like an overgrown puppy. "How...? How is this possible?"
"I found him caught in a trap in the forest. I just couldn't let him die. I couldn't. I managed to get some help from a vet in amputating the leg, I told her he was being rescued and taken to a sanctuary. It cost a lot to persuade her but Dad didn't notice."

>"Does he...?"
"What Dad? No way. You're the first person to see Toothless. If Dad or Gobber is around, Toothless stays out in the estate, usually in the old hunting shack a couple of miles from here."

>"I just can't believe this. You trained a wolf! A wolf!"
"Well I wouldn't say trained exactly. I didn't really do much. He just sort of learns..."

>"I always knew you were different Hiccup... But this was not what I expected at all." She said smiling at him as Toothless slobbered a wet kiss over her cheek making her laugh and pet him again.<p>

"Ok so the solution to question 25 is... negative 3 right?" She asked a while later. Hiccup glanced between her workings and his own to double check her answer. She was chewing on the pink rubber on the end of her yellow pencil, nose wrinkled slightly as she tried to work it out herself. Her other hand was resting on the head of a huge black wolf who had his head on her lap, eyes closed in contentment at the affection he was receiving. Hiccup had to smile. It was like a scene from a movie or some wild unreachable dream of his.

>"Yeah, but you've got question 23 wrong. You worked it out right, but you wrote that 4a equals 32 when it actually equals 28."
"Damn!" She muttered, crossing out her error and writing the correct answer in. "Eurgh... I don't think I can keep focus anymore. Can we do something else now?"

>"Well we could go back over that chemistry..."
"I meant something fun."

>"Exactly." He teased and she hit his shoulder.
"Not school

related then!" she said as her stomach gave a sudden rumble.
>"I think it's time to order take out. Your stomach makes as much noise as Toothless when he snores!" He laughed, this time Toothless batted his leg lightly with a paw. "Oh sure gang up on me!" Astrid scratched Toothless and smiled. "If you're going to be rude about us or cheeky to us we will!"
"And I thought dogs were man's best friend and loyal to the end?"
>"He's a wolf not a dog!"
"He acts like one sometimes."
>"Just ignore him Toothless!" The wolf snorted and resumed his happy snoozing.
"So, take out?" Hiccup asked grinning at her.
>"Sounds good. What do you have in mind?"
"It's up to you; we can get pizza, Indian, Chinese, fish and chips, Kentucky..."
>"Hmmm... Choices choices..." She mused with a thoughtful smile. "I think I'm feeling like Chinese tonight."
"Chinese it is." He said snatching up the menu from a drawer and tossing it to her before grabbing the phone. She hummed for a minute as she looked at the options.
>"Can I get the crispy spicy shredded beef, with egg fried rice and prawn crackers?" She asked looking up. Hiccup nodded and relayed her order tacking his own order onto the end.
"Should be here in half an hour." He said putting the phone down.
>"Mmmm... Better be; I'm starving!" Astrid complained.
"Just be patient!" Hiccup laughed sitting down again. "What time is this movie on anyway?"
>"Oh not for another three quarters of an hour."
"What shall we do until it starts?"
>"I don't mind... But no more work! I'm serious!" He laughed again and flicked the TV on finding any old program for them to watch until the movie started.
Hiccup loved it. She was so relaxed, sat there just stroking Toothless as naturally as if he were her own dog, laughing loudly at the TV. Hearing her laugh was amazing. It rang in his ears like music, punctuated occasionally by a snort of laughter which sprayed coke over Toothless when she laughed too much whilst drinking. Hiccup hardly dared to believe it was real. The way she looked when she smiled and laughed, that glint in her eyes when she looked at him. It was a whole new definition of beautiful.

>"Hiccup?" Her voice suddenly broke through his thought waves , loud and clear and radiant. "Hiccup? The doorbell just went. I think it's our Chinese."
"Oh right!" He stood up quickly and grabbed his wallet.
>"Wait! What's my share?" She asked trying to reach for her bag without disturbing Toothless.
"We'll worry about that later. Just sit back."
>"But!"
"Nope!" And he walked to the door to collect the food.

Astrid slumped with a grin on her face and tickled Toothless. The wolf was growing on her with every passing second. It was surprising just how affectionate he was, and how affectionate she felt for him.

>"You know, he's not so bad Toothless. He's actually pretty great. You know that though don't you boy?" She asked smiling "I don't know why I never really paid him any attention before. I mean, he's funny and sweet, and intelligent. He's so different to everyone else in my life, and my uncle thought the world of him. Why did I never see it?"She looked towards the doorway where Hiccup had just left and pondered for a moment. "I guess I just wasn't looking for it. But I can make up for that right Toothless? I mean, it'll change now... sort of. Oh Toothless, I can never be like this at school because

it's not who they think I am. They don't know me. No one really does. Even Hiccup wouldn't be here if he really knew me. I think even you'd run for the hills." She attempted to laugh but ended up just sighing sadly. "Never mind hey boy? With his help, I might just be able to make something of myself. I just hope he can work miracles."

Toothless gave a grumble as if to say Hiccup probably could and she smiled.
"Alright, food's here. Do you need cutlery or can you use chopsticks?" He asked walking back in. The aroma of the food was intoxicating.

>"You can use chopsticks?" She asked in surprise. He chuckled lightly.
"I learned. I'll bring you some cutlery." He walked over and laid the food containers on the coffee table and passed her a knife and fork, offering her a spoon with a teasing smile.

>"You know, just in case the knife and fork are too complicated."
"Hey! That's not fair! Chopsticks are hard to use!"

>"Not really." He said as he twirled a set in his fingers and picked up a prawn with ease, tossing it into his mouth.
"Show off!" She said, grinning despite herself. "I didn't think you were a show off but apparently I was mistaken!"

>"Well, I'm just a pro with chopsticks!" He laughed. "Prawn?" She raised an eyebrow at him and took a prawn, impaling it on her fork. "So barbaric." He sniggered tossing another prawn into his mouth with chopsticks.
"Teach me."

>"I thought you were bored of learning."
"Teach me to use the chopsticks or I can find another place to put them."

>"Violent!" He laughed. "Alright, just seems like a waste of good food..." She hit him on the arm. "Ow!"
"That's for assuming I'm going to drop everything!"

>"Alright alright!" He laughed. She was growing to like that sound, Hiccup's laugh. There was something warm and uplifting about it. "Ok, first off you gotta hold them right. Like this, no wait... no give me your hand..." She felt a sudden rush as he took her hand, repositioning her fingers to hold the chopsticks correctly. "There, that's better."<p>

It took them a lot longer to get through the food than it should have, and a few dropped prawns or bits of crispy beef... But finally Astrid could just about use the chopsticks. Hiccup had laughed at her several times, resulting in her hitting his shoulder or arm.

>"Ok, so I'm going to have a bruise there... But I think you've got it." He grinned at her, a goofy crooked smile that she couldn't help smiling back at. "Fortune cookie?" He offered.
"You seriously get these?" she laughed.

>"Yeah, I don't think mine has ever been accurate, it never tells you you're going to get kicked in the dirt. But it's kind of funny."
"Alright... Give me one then."

>"You want the one on the left or the right?"
"I'll go right." He tossed her the fortune cookie and picked up his own one, cracking it open easily.

>"Hmmm... 'people are attracted by your delicate features'... Yeah right." He scoffed. "Is yours any more likely to be accurate? I think mine is more likely to be yours." He said scratching the now snoring wolf.
"I don't have delicate features!"

>"Whatever you say." He said shrugging. She shot him a glare, smiling slightly before opening her own fortune cookie. "So, what's it say?" Astrid looked at it
_'___A new romance is about to make an appearance'_

She slammed her bedroom door and tugged her headphones over her ears

to drown out her father's yelling. She'd told him she was going to be late back because she was studying... But apparently that wasn't good enough. He'd not stopped yelling since she got in. She hummed to herself, trying to keep his voice from impeding on her mind. She thought about Toothless and Hiccup and anything except her father.

>She'd actually enjoyed tonight, watching the movie with Hiccup, betting on which character would die next... She'd made two quid, lost a quid and regained it. She'd shrugged off the stupid fortune cookie fortune. Hiccup was right, it was all nonsense. They'd laughed about it and mucked about a bit. It had been easy, natural even. Something just felt right about sitting and joking with Hiccup, and cuddling Toothless. That baffled her as much as anything, she'd been quite happy to cuddle a wolf... A three-legged wolf, but a wolf nonetheless. She was actually looking forward to next week and doing the same thing. It was a nice change, there was less lying, less being fake, less acting out... It was free of anger, guilt and bitterness. It was definitely something she could get used to.
"IT WAS DOWNRIGHT INCONSIDERATE AND..."

>"Eurgh." Astrid groaned. The headphones were apparently not going to be enough. Her father's voice somehow managed to penetrate even the loudest of music. She was sure she'd be hearing his voice echoing through her head for the next two weeks. She heard footsteps thundering on the stairs and froze. She glanced nervously at her battered doorknob before grabbing her desk chair and ramming it underneath it. She was not dealing with this tonight. Then she clamped her hands over her headphones and hummed along to the music, screwing her eyes tight shut in an effort to ignore the bashing and banging on her door and her father's loud screaming and yelling. He'd calm down, eventually. It took a while; it seemed her father hadn't intended to calm down anytime soon. He did give up trying to open the door eventually but persisted in his yelling for a good hour after that. After a while, his loud mutterings and cursing quietened down until the front door finally slammed shut.
Astrid sighed. What was it like to have a normal easy going life? She didn't remove the chair from the door. Years of experience told her that her angry father would likely come home drunk, and a drunk and angry father was worse than her normal one. Her phone buzzed in her pocket despite the late hour and she smiled.

>Looked like her weekend would be better than her week.<p>

The photos were all over Facebook. And pretty much every other social networking site used by the pupils in Berk High. Astrid sitting poolside at some fancy house in nothing but a skimpy little bikini with some hulking Marine boys' arm draped around her shoulders. It made Hiccup more annoyed than it ought to have done.

>It wasn't like he had any claim over her, she'd come to his house for help studying, watched a movie, eaten Chinese food and met his pet wolf. She hadn't shoved her tongue down his throat or asked him out. But somehow, it still really bothered him that the gorgeous and totally out of his league Astrid Hofferson, was sitting around sunning herself in a bikini with Marines.
He didn't know why he was torturing himself by reading the comments and looking at the photos.

>Rachel 'Ruff' Thorston: Looking seriously hot girl! Going to hook me up with one yet?
Astrid Hofferson: No chance Ruff!

>Eric Erikson: Looking amazing there Astrid. Was a fun day, we have to go out again before we ship out!
Jackson Gray: Eric is right, got to do it again soon! Plus, gotta say it, you look hot as Hell!

>Astrid Hofferson: We should do it again soon
Eric Erikson:
Absolutely! And Jackson, quit with saying things like that!

>Jackson Gray: Wasn't talking to you Eric
Astrid Hofferson: No but I might be ;)

>Rachel 'Ruff' Thorston: I definitely am! Eric, you are hot as Hell!
Eric Erikson: Errr thanks? Astrid, I'm loving that pic of the two of us by the pool. Mind sending it to me?

>Astrid Hofferson: Sure thing _J__

>Hiccup found the photo Eric was referring to, he was tall and muscled with a tattoo on his arm and thick dark hair, his other arm was wrapped around Astrid who looked radiant as ever with her long locks of gold braided beautifully over one shoulder, her blue eyes sparkling as she flashed the lucky camera man a smile. She deserved a man like that. A big tough guy, someone brave and macho. He sighed and closed the page. He couldn't keep looking at those photos. It gave him stomach ache. He scratched Toothless on the head and began resuming focus on the task at hand; researching colleges without his Dad knowing.

>It was no secret that the top places were already taking an interest. But Hiccup wanted to make the choice for himself. Not anyone else. He still had a while before he really had to think about this stuff, but with his extra classes and such, Hiccup knew that time would go fast. Three colleges had already offered him the chance to start up on a course early. It wasn't something he'd considered, but he could easily do it.
"What do you think bud? Do I just get it all over with, pack up my bags and get the Hell out of Berk?" The wolf snorted his disapproval and resumed his sleepy state. Hiccup chuckled.

>"Lazy wolf. I'd find a way to keep you with me. Don't worry bud." The wolf didn't respond other than to offer another snort as he slept. Hiccup carried on scrolling, his nose screwed up as he read through pages after pages after pages on colleges and different courses he could enrol in. None of it made much sense to him. The lists were endless! How was he supposed to decide what he wanted for his future? All he wanted was to keep his wolf. That and his childhood dream of living happily ever after with the great Astrid Hofferson. But it was more likely that he'd tell his Dad about Toothless, have him tell him he thought it was great, that he was proud of him and that Hiccup could do whatever he wanted and he'd be proud, as pigs flew overhead, than him ever have a chance with Astrid.
He knew it was a waste of his efforts to even dream about such a possibility. He should be focussed solely on his education, although maybe a little percentage could be focussed on Toothless. He thought about those photos again and found himself once again looking up enlisting in the marines. He knew this was stupid. He'd never get in, and if he did, it was only to impress a girl he stood no chance with. Nonetheless, he bookmarked the page so he could find it again easily.

>His computer suddenly flashed up telling him he had a new message, on Facebook. No one ever messaged him on Facebook! His only friends were Gobber, Fishlegs and his Dad. He clicked onto the message and saw to his surprise and joy, it was from Astrid Hofferson!
Astrid Hofferson: Hey Hiccup. I was going to text or call, but I realised I didn't have your number! So I tried stalking you on Facebook instead! :P Are we still on for Thursday? Because Miss was going on and on in maths about some weird thing she calls algebra and I don't have a clue what she meant! Can my tutor help me? Pretty please? I'll pay for dinner this time! Since you shoved my money back in my purse! I only noticed when I got in! Sneaky! Let me know ASAP, Astrid

>Hiccup's stomach somersaulted. She messaged him! She wanted his help, and she wanted to do the dinner thing again! All his rational thoughts of giving up on the unrealistic dream of Astrid went out the window as he eagerly typed back a response.

>Hugo Haddock: Hey Astrid. Yeah sure we're still on for Thursday as long as that still works for you. You don't need to pay for the food, my treat.
_He waited with baited breath for her to reply. He didn't have to wait long which only made his stomach flip again.

>Astrid Hofferson: No way! You sneakily treated last week! It's my turn!
Hugo Haddock: Not necessary! My dad can afford it.

>Astrid Hofferson: Not letting you get away with this

Haddock!
Hugo Haddock: You won't have a choice

>Astrid Hofferson: You are messing with the wrong girl

Haddock!
Hugo Haddock: I really don't think I am

>Astrid Hofferson: Cheeky! Where's all this sass coming

from?!
Hugo Haddock: I've always been a king of sass

>Astrid Hofferson: Oh really?
Hugo Haddock: Absolutely. You just never noticed before!

>Astrid Hofferson: Alright Sass King! I don't think there's any movies on on Thursday, shall I bring something along or do you want to pick one up after school or use some fancy machine to watch one on the TV?
Hugo Haddock: We can watch films online on the TV if you want

>Astrid Hofferson: You tell me Sass King
Hugo Haddock: I think I prefer you calling me Hiccup!

>Astrid Hofferson: I couldn't find you originally! Then I realised you probably didn't go by Hiccup!
Hugo Haddock: What?

>Hugo Haddock: Oh my name, right. Hang on...
Hugo 'Hiccup' Haddock: Is that better?

>Astrid Hofferson: Yeah much better! The Hugo thing still confuses me though ;D
Hugo 'Hiccup' Haddock: Oh haha very funny!

>Astrid Hofferson: :P Nice profile picture by the way. Where did you take that one?
Hugo 'Hiccup' Haddock: It's one I took of our estate one morning at sunrise.

>Astrid Hofferson: There's just one problem with it...
Hugo 'Hiccup' Haddock: What's that?

>Astrid Hofferson: You're not actually in it. You only have like five photos of you and about ten that you uploaded yourself none of which are of you.
Hugo 'Hiccup' Haddock: Oh well, have you seen how popular I am on this site? Is it any real surprise? Your profile picture is nice. Was that taken at the weekend?

>Astrid Hofferson: Oh yeah, Eric took that one. I liked it best. I don't look so good in some the others.
Hugo 'Hiccup' Haddock: You look great in them! What are you on about?!

>Astrid Hofferson: Awww you're making me blush xD I just don't like the way I look much. Hopefully I'll be able to get a more natural one sometime. I just look so fake in those.
Hugo 'Hiccup' Haddock: Really? I think you look nice

>Astrid Hofferson: Shush you! It's forced smile for the camera, I had make up on and my hair all done up, and sitting in a bikini requires some very careful photography skills to make sure I don't end up with a scar or something showing.
Hugo 'Hiccup' Haddock: You have scars?

>Astrid Hofferson: Yeah, it's only fun if you get a scar out of it.
Hugo 'Hiccup' Haddock: Yeah right, pain, love it.

>Astrid Hofferson: Sarcasm suits you well :P
_They talked for hours and Hiccup could honestly not remember feeling giddier. She was

talking to him! Sure it was over a computer, but it was something! Right?

>Astrid Hofferson: Oh shit... Hiccup, you realise the time right?! We have to be up for school in like six hours!
Hugo

'Hiccup' Haddock: Oh... Right yeah. We should get some sleep. Toothless already is.

>Astrid Hofferson: Aww give him a kiss from me!
Hugo 'Hiccup' Haddock: Haha.

>Hugo 'Hiccup' Haddock: It's so weird... You freaked when you first saw him, now you're sending him virtual kisses!
Astrid Hofferson: Yeah well, turns out he's pretty loveable

>Hugo 'Hiccup' Haddock: Yeah he is. Anyway, goodnight Astrid, sweet dreams
Astrid Hofferson: Yeah, If I fall asleep at school tomorrow I'm blaming you! Goodnight Hiccup, Night Toothless, sweet dreams to you both! Xx

>Once again his stomach flipped several times over and settling for sleep seemed that much harder, except for Toothless who was completely out of it already.

Going to school had never seemed quite so easy, and that was saying something. Hiccup never struggled with going to school for the most part, because he genuinely enjoyed it, but knowing he had a chance to talk to Astrid... To see her and not have her look right through him like a ghost, that just made it all the better.

>It was a day like any other. He arrived at school and walked swiftly to his locker. He'd learned the quicker he moved, the less likely it was that Scott would catch him. He opened his locker and a scrappy bit of white paper fell out of it. Curious, Hiccup picked up the paper to find a note scrawled across it.
_'__Looking forward to Thursday Haddock! But you kept me up late last night and now I'm tired! You owe me ;) See you in home room, Astrid x'

>His heart skipped a beat and he nearly reached for his inhaler as he tried to get a stem of oxygen back into his lungs and brain. She was putting notes in his locker?! That was like the ultimate high school rom-com cheese factor! But he didn't care. Astrid Hofferson left a note in his locker! And she signed it with a kiss!

>"What's this?!" A voice exclaimed snatching the paper from his hands. Hiccup let out a surprised yelp. Not now. Why did Scott have to see that? Everyone knew Scott liked Astrid. And everyone knew Scott hated Hiccup. "What the hell is this Haddock?!" He demanded shaking the note in his fist in front of him. Hiccup swallowed hard.
"It's a piece of paper." He said casual as he could.

>"Don't sass me! It's got writing on it! From Astrid!"
"Oh so you can actually read then?" Bad move. Very bad move. Scott was like a raging bull and Hiccup just waved the red flag. Why did he have to use his smart-mouth now? Why? Why?

>"You want to say that again little Hiccup?" He said his voice dangerously low. Hiccup swallowed again. Most the other kids were hurrying to classrooms. No one noticed Scott threatening him again.
"Err... Maybe not." He said feeling pathetic.

>"That's what I thought." Scott growled. "But I'm still going to make you pay for saying that." With a swift move Hiccup crumpled to the floor, his books falling everywhere. He groaned as he held his stomach where Scott had rammed his knee. Scott then crouched down to his level and decked him hard enough to make his head bounce off the locker door. "And that's for this note. Stay away from Astrid." And he walked away chucking the note in the bin as he did so.
Hiccup sat there for a minute, letting his vision refocus, counting carefully in his head before checking his nose to make sure it wasn't

broken. His stomach still ached painfully and his head hurt. He rubbed the back to check for blood, but just felt the forming of a lump where his head had hit. With a groan he tried to move to gather his things back up, his head starting to spin making him feel nauseous. Scott's hits were getting far more powerful... Not a good thing. He slumped back down the front of the lockers to sit on the floor holding his head trying to keep the world from spinning.

>Then he was hallucinating. He was sure of it. A pair of battered black and white Converse appeared and ran over to him, a pair of pale slender legs came into view and then denim shorts as the hallucination crouched down he saw a red top creep into his field of vision.
"Hiccup? Hiccup?" A voice echoed somewhere in the back of his brain and a hand reached out to gently pull his face up. Now he knew hallucinations couldn't touch you, but since he was looking into the blue orbs of Astrid Hofferson, he had to be.

>"Oh Hiccup! Look at me, look right at me." She instructed keeping his face up. "How many fingers am I holding up?" She asked and he squinted trying to count.
"Four?"

>"Two. You're seeing double. We're going to the medical room right now."
"No... No I don't want..." He felt sick still and all the wind had been knocked from him when Scott hit him in the stomach. It was catching up with him now that he needed his inhaler. "Inhaler..." He gasped suddenly. She grabbed it quickly from his bag and passed it to him.

>"Did you know you're bleeding?"
"I am?"

>"Yes. I'm taking you to the medical room like it or not Hiccup. Jeez, there's a time and a place to get a smart mouth!"
"How did you...?" He mumbled taking another puff from his inhaler.

>"Scott came in laughing and bragging about it so I came out to find you." She said examining him carefully. "Why did you have to say that to him? Whether it was justified is another matter. You know what he's like."
"I didn't think..."

>"That's obvious. Come on, I'll stay with you and then we can..."
"No..." He grumbled taking her wrist as Scott's words echoed in his brain.

>"What do you mean no? Hiccup, you need medical attention..."
"He said... He said to stay away from you." Hiccup mumbled, ashamed of himself. "He told me to keep away from you." Astrid stared at him. At least he thought she was, even her features were starting to swirl.

>"Fuck that. I'll hang out with whoever I like. He has no say in the matter."
"But he..."

>"He doesn't need to know. I'm not going to let him get away with this. Besides, without you, I'll flunk." She smiled but his heart sank. She just needed him to pass her exams. He wasn't really anything to her. "Come on, I'm taking you to get help." He didn't fight her. Didn't try to resist because he knew it was fruitless, just as any idea of him and her being a reality was.<p>

They sent him home after several hours. His father had been called but it was Gobber who'd come for him. As usual. Gobber had taken him to the hospital to get checked out as the school nurse had recommended. It was hours before they got out.

>"No lasting damage at least eh lad?" Gobber said as they made their way back to the house. Hiccup hoped Toothless was wandering further afield today. "How did ye get into that state anyways?"
"Oh umm... I tripped in the corridor and hit my head on an open locker door and then banged into another behind me..." He lied, holding an ice pack to the swollen egg on the back of his head.

>"Uh huh, is that so? Because it looks more like someone 'it ye in the face." He laughed nervously.
"What? No... Nothing like that..." It was a poor attempt at lying but he tried.
>"Look lad, boys fight, and I know it ain't your style, but it wouldn't kill ya to know how to dodge a punch at least."
"Gobber it's fine. I just tripped ok?"
>"Hiccup if yer being bullied and beaten up..."
"I said it's fine!" He snapped. He didn't want to deal with everyone knowing his cousin beat the stuffing out of him. And he knew it would only get worse if Scott found out anyone knew.
>"Hugo... If someone is hurtin' ya, you can't let them git away with it. Just, tell us a name and we'll..."
"No. There's nothing to tell. I had an accident. Now would you please just drop it?!" Gobber was quite for a minute before he spoke again.
>"Hugo... You're the son I never had. And no father wants to see 'is son beaten up. If you think you can handle whatever bully did this, then fine. But I ain't going ta just drop it, because I don't like seeing ya hurt, because you're family and I will always try ta keep you from harm." Hiccup looked at him.
"Whatever it is, I'll deal with it. Don't worry Gobber. And thank you, again for being my other dad. I can always count on you to come pick me up. It's good to know at least one of you cares."
>"Now Hugo, yer dad does care he just..."
"...has a funny way of showing it. I don't want to talk about this either." Again Gobber was quite for a while. Then he spoke once more.
>"Was nice o' Astrid ta wait with ya." He said quietly. "Still looking out fer ya."
"She was with me when I err... hit my head. And what do you still?" He asked curious, the pain in his head dulling to a light throb as the drugs from the hospital took effect.

>"Ach ya don' remember. When you two were kids, just wee little things, she used ta be yer best friend. You were always so nervous about playing rough games, but Astrid decided you needed a little adventure in yer life." He chuckled fondly at the memory. "Ya used ta run round the old community centre playing crazy games and battling pirates and dragons looking fer lost treasure... The old folks down there loved it, watching ya play yer games, running round their feet and asking about the lost treasure of Long John Silver." Hiccup had to smile at that idea. "Yer mum and Astrid's uncle Finn thought it was brilliant. They used to draw out treasure maps and bury little beads and coins fer ya ta find."
"Really?"
>"Oh aye. You two were quite the double act. Almost inseparable."
"Well that's hard to believe. It's not like that anymore. She doesn't even really talk to me much."
>"But she cares."
"Gobber, she happened to be there..."
>"You listen ta me lad... She was there and she waited with ya, checking you were ok. She wouldn't do that if she didn't care at all." He gave Hiccup a smile and Hiccup's head began spinning once more with all this new information.<p>

Astrid had practically run home to jump on her old laptop after school. Gobber had come to fetch Hiccup and take him to the hospital. Astrid didn't think anything was seriously wrong, since there were no obvious signs besides that lump on his head, the mild concussion and his bloody nose, but she still wanted to check.
>So as soon as she got in she went straight onto Facebook and messaged Hiccup. Waiting with her fingers crossed and biting her lip for him to reply.
She was sat for quite a while waiting anxiously, but no reply came. She tried to do some of her homework... But focussing on it was proving difficult. She just wanted to know if he

was alright. That wasn't too much to ask was it? And it was normal to want to know if he was ok. Yes. Totally normal. She tried telling herself he probably just wasn't on his laptop. He was probably just resting. Maybe Gobber had gone out and Toothless was curled up with him. Yeah, that was it. He was resting and Toothless had his head on his lap keeping him from moving. When she heard a bing she almost jumped out of her seat, but it wasn't Hiccup. It was Scott.

>"Eurgh. What does he want?" She muttered aloud.
_Scott Jorgenson: Hey babe hows it going?
>Astrid Hofferson: Swimmingly.
Scott Jorgenson: Sweet! You wanna catch a movie tomorrow night after training?
>Astrid Hofferson: Can't sorry
Scott Jorgenson: Awww that sucks. Why not?
>Astrid Hofferson: Homework
Scott Jorgenson: Can't you do that tonight?
>Astrid Hofferson: And when would I do tomorrow's homework?
Scott Jorgenson: The next day
>Astrid Hofferson: Can't. Family thing. So bad luck buddy.
Scott Jorgenson: Well then how about you come over mine and we do some studying of our own ;)
>Astrid Hofferson: You're an open shut case Scott, oversized ego and muscles. Minimal brain power. Nothing to study there.
Scott Jorgenson: Well then how about we do a little experiment with you and me?
>Astrid Hofferson: I've trialled that one before.
Scott Jorgenson: Really? How does it end?
>Astrid Hofferson: With my fist in your face and my knee to your groin.
Scott Jorgenson: Whatever babe, I'll win you over eventually
>Astrid Hofferson: I don't like guys who beat up people for sport
Scott Jorgenson: Huh?
>Astrid Hofferson: Or guys who tell me what to do
Scott Jorgenson: What you talking about babe?
>Astrid Hofferson: Eurgh. Don't call me that.
Scott Jorgenson: But babe...
>Astrid Hofferson: Go think with your muscles Scott. Leave me alone.
_She ignored the dozen messages he sent her after that. She thought it was horrible what he did to Hiccup and she hated that he got away with it. She wanted to do something, but Hiccup had asked her not to. She'd respect that. She just hoped he was alright, that he wasn't too battered and bruised.
>"ASTRID!" A yell echoed up the stairs. Astrid flinched at the sound of it. "GET THE FUCK DOWN THESE STAIRS RIGHT NOW!" she didn't move. She glanced at the screen, praying for an answer from Hiccup. For a solution to her problem. But the screen did nothing. "DON'T MAKE ME COME UP THERE!" Astrid slammed the laptop shut and ran to the toilet and locked the door. Panting slightly she yelled back.
"I'M IN THE LOO! JEEZ! CALM THE FUCK DOWN!" For a moment there was silence and she relaxed, flushing the chain and moving to open the door. Then she heard the footsteps.

She was relieved to see Hiccup back in school a couple of days later. It seemed Gobber had kept him off for the day following the incident, just to be on the safe side. But he seemed just fine, still the same Hiccup. Although he was currently sporting a nice purple bruise across the bridge of his nose that stretched to his eyes. Her heart ached knowing that was because of Scott and his idiocy. He offered her a weak smile as he sat down in home room, but he looked away quickly when Scott entered.

>"Well look who's back! It's the little Hiccup!" He cackled "Nice face." Hiccup looked down at his desk and said nothing. His face had fallen and he looked sad and defeated. Astrid felt irrationally angry about it. She clenched a fist but quickly pulled it inside the sleeve of her sweater top. It was a hot day but she wore a red sweater top with a short black skirt, leggings and her worn boots.
"Where were you yesterday Hiccup? Missed you in football. Don't worry, we'll make up for it."

>Hiccup's face fell further still and Astrid had to fight every urge not to stand up and do something.
"How about this lunch we play a little catch up game. You vs us. How does that sound little Hiccup?" He said nothing. "We'll see you outside then Hiccup."

>"Leave him alone." Astrid snapped. Scott turned to look sharply at her, even Hiccup looked up slightly. "What's he ever done to you?"
"It's more the fact he exists."

>"That's pathetic." She spat. "Pathetic. You think you're a big man? He never hits back..."
"Because he's weak and pathetic." Hiccup shrank in his seat.

>"Because he's the better man. Never dobs you in it. If it was me, you'd have several broken bones by now."
"Yeah right!"

>"Want to try it?" She hissed. "Pick on someone your own size for a change! Leave him alone!" Scott took a step towards her.
"I'd never hit you babe, you're too..."

>"Don't even try it. It's disgusting. He's been back for five minutes and already you're threatening him. He hasn't even said a word. It's not impressive. It's not big. It's stupid and I think you're a pathetic coward." She snapped as the teacher walked in, forcing Scott to fall silent.<p>

Hiccup watched her. He felt so powerless and pathetic. He couldn't stand up to Scott. He was just Scott's punching bag and he always would be. And whilst he loved knowing Astrid cared enough to stand up for him, he just felt more powerless. That strong gorgeous goddess was able to challenge Scott, but little old Hiccup? He could do little more than stare after an impossible dream with a heavy sigh.

>Hiccup waited until most everyone else had left before gathering his things to follow. He shoved back the sleeves of his top, Hiccup always wore a long sleeve top under his t-shirt, even in the middle of summer, but today it was pretty hot and out of reluctant necessity, he exposed his forearms to the air. As he walked out he spotted Astrid. Unusually, she was wearing a long sleeved top today. Only the other day she'd been in shorts and a vest top. But he had to admit, she still looked stunning, if a little out of place beside Rachel Thorston in her tiny t-shirt and tattered shorts.
"I'll catch you up in a minute." She told Rachel before she walked over to him and offered a small smile. "Hey, I'm glad to see you're ok."

>"Oh yeah... Thanks."
"You're welcome." She kept smiling. Hiccup bit the inside of his lip trying to think of something to say, preferably impressive or funny. But that was hard with a purple nose. "Hey, you actually do have arms not just hands on sleeves!" She joked gesturing to his exposed arms. He smiled bashfully and folded them as if to hide them from view.

>"Yeah well, it's hot today so..."
"Yeah it is." She rubbed her own arms awkwardly. He wondered why she didn't roll her sleeves up too. "Hey, are we still on for tomorrow evening? I mean, I'll understand if you don't want to..." He was still watching the way her hands moved on her arms. Trying to understand her behaviour. Then he looked up slowly.

>"Sure. I'm still happy to tutor you."
"Ok great, I'll get dinner tomorrow, you got it last time."
>"Astrid that's really not..." She cut him off with a finger to his lips.
"Nuh uh uh Haddock. Rule number one, if a lady wants to buy you dinner, you say yes."
>"I thought you were supposed to argue until she let you pay?" He said with a grin
"Not when it's this girl you don't."
>"I dunno... I feel like taking a risk."
"Careful Haddock if you play with fire, you might just get burned."
>"Then I can add it to this rather nice bruise." She grinned at him
"Baby steps Hiccup. You've got scars from saving Toothless, a bruise from a jackass... You don't want to be burned by a woman. You know what they say 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned'"
>"I guess I'll just have to make sure I don't invoke your scornful wrath then." She flashed him another grin before walking away saying
"Don't play with fire Hiccup!" But right then, he wanted nothing more than to play with the fire, no matter how dangerous it might be.

6. Chapter 6 - Fibs, French and Feuds

So we have a shorter chapter but I think the cut off point worked here. And prepare for some French speaking Hiccup - canon in the books! Forgive any mistranslations, I used Google translate as my high school French is a bit rusty. Here you go then.

"Hey, what was with hanging back to talk to the Hiccup?" Rachel 'Ruff' asked Astrid as she rejoined her friend.
>"I was just checking he was alright after that thing with Scott the other day."
"Ok... Why?"
>"Because Scott decked him for no good reason!"
"Yeah, we all saw you snap at him during homeroom. My question is why. You've never shown any special interest before."
>"Because it's pathetic. Hiccup has never done anything to him. You heard him, 'it's more the fact he exists'. How lowly is that?!"
"Didn't realise you cared so much." Ruff said shrugging.

>"I just think Hiccup is a much better guy than Scott and he doesn't deserve to be treated like total crap."
"Ok but when did you decide Hiccup was so great?"
>"He's always been great. We just don't always see it."
"But when did you really click?"
>"Ruff you are not playing therapist with me right now."
"I'm just asking..."
>"He was there ok? After uncle Finn... He just, he understood. He was real and sympathetic without giving me the pity act. Uncle Finn always thought a lot of Hiccup and Hiccup was there for me after..." She looked away. Best friends or not, she didn't like talking about her uncle's death.
"Oh... Astrid I'm sorry. I was just wondering..."
>"It's fine Ruff. Can we drop it now please?" Ruff nodded.
"Yeah, course we can." Pity, she knew it was pity. Ruff knew she'd touched a sensitive nerve and she was backing off because she felt bad for Astrid. Astrid hated that simpering piteous look on her friend's face. It didn't suit the boisterous blonde at all. "So, what's with the sweatshirt and leggings? It's a scorcher and you've got the legs to pull off that skirt without leggings, and you've got nicely toned arms too." Astrid flinched again, sub-consciously touching her arms.

>"I just... I like this outfit."
"But why not roll up the sleeves at least?"

>"Because... That would look stupid."
"Astrid..."

>"Drop it Ruff!"
"You're my best friend! I'm just asking..."

>"Well don't!" They didn't speak for several minutes, taking their seats and getting out their books ready for the lesson to begin. It wasn't until they started on the task set that Astrid sighed and whispered to her friend.
"I was testing a self tan spray thing; I looked too pale in those photos at the weekend. I had an allergic reaction to it and I've got a rash on my arm. To try and make covering it look a little more inconspicuous I wore the leggings too. It should fade in a few days." Ruff said nothing for a moment then she turned to look at Astrid.

>"Why didn't you just tell me that in the first place?"
"I dunno... I just felt kind of stupid, figured you'd make fun of me for trying self tan stuff."

>"Yeah I might have said something, because you're not that pale, not like Hiccup. He IS pale. But you had me thinking like there was something really wrong."
"No, just a rash. But I don't really want it broadcast around, got that?"

>"My lips are sealed." Things relaxed a bit again after that. Ruff asked endlessly if she would fix her up with Eric, and again, she refused. Then things got weird again.
"If you're into Hiccup why does it matter if you set me up with Eric?" Ruff asked causing Astrid to drop her pen on the floor.

>"W...What?! I'm not INTO Hiccup!"
"I thought you said..."

>"I said he was a good guy! That he was there after I lost my uncle!" She spluttered retrieving her pen from under the table.
"Yeah, so I just thought with the whole checking up on him and snapping at Scott about beating him up, that you liked him."

>"I do like him!"
"So I was right?"

>"No! Not... not like him. Not like THAT. Just, like friends."

>"You're friends with him then?"
"Well, yeah... I think so anyway."

>"But you're not into him?"
"Not like that. No." She said feeling very awkward. Especially when she recalled that fortune cookie. 'A new romance...' No. Definitely not. Hiccup was a great guy, a really great guy, but it was totally platonic between them. Right? Yes. Absolutely. There was absolutely no way in the world she was into Hiccup romantically. _Yet._ She silenced the small voice in the back of her head. She was certain that she was absolutely certain that she really wasn't entirely totally completely sure if she didn't like Hiccup that way or not. She put her head in her hands trying to get her head straight again.

>"Astrid? Are you ok? Because you kind of look a bit at war suddenly."
"I'm fine. Honest. It's just, weird you asking that."

>"Sorry, I just wasn't sure. Besides, I thought you weren't seeing Eric anyway?"
"I'm not, but that doesn't mean I'm setting you up with him."

>"Do you like him? He is pretty hot."
"No. He's a decent guy, and yeah, he's hot. But I'm just not, into him that way."

>"And you're not into his friends?"
"Nope. He's the best of them."

>"And you hate Scott?"
"Damn right."

>"And you don't like my brother?"
"Errr... No. That would be just as creepy as Scott."

>"And you don't like Fishlegs?"
"Definitely not."

>"And you're not into Hiccup either?"
"I'm most definitely completely totally one hundred percent certain that I'm not."

>"Well there's no arguing with that amount of certainty." Ruff said smirking. Astrid glared at her and elbowed her in the ribs.
"I'm not into him like that! He's just a genuinely nice guy with no ulterior motives and that's really refreshing. He's sweet."

>"Whatever you say."
"Eurgh, come on. We've got phys ed. next." Astrid said shoving her stuff into her bag.

Hiccup was frantically taking notes as the teacher rambled on in French. If he was going to get that A grade he needed to make sure he had the best notes he could.

>"Alright class, I'd like you all to practice speaking in pairs now please. Try to use the conditional tense as well please. You have twenty minutes, I don't want to hear a word of English." Hiccup turned to his partner, Fishlegs and began speaking.
"Bonjour, Je espÃ"re que vous Ã"tes bien aujourd'hui mon ami. Je pensais que nous pourrions commencer aujourd'hui par aller sur certains des bits de pratique pour l'examen de langue."

>(Hello, I hope you're well today my friend. I thought we could start today by going over some of the practise bits for the speaking exam.)
_Fishlegs rolled his eyes and replied in the same fluent manner.

>"Coupez la merde Hiccup. Nous savons tous les deux que nous pouvons bluffer notre chemin Ã" travers ces examens. Je veux savoir pourquoi Astrid parlait tout Ã" l'heure. Elle est venue vous parler la semaine derniÃ"re aussi, ce qui se passe?"
*_ (Cut the crap Hiccup. We both know we can bluff our way through these exams. I want to know why Astrid was talking to you earlier. She came to talk to you last week too, what's going on)

>*_It was Hiccup's turn to roll his eyes.

>"SÃ"rieusement? Nous allons en parler en franÃ§ais?"
*_ (Seriously? We're going to talk about this in French?)

>*_ "Oui parce que le reste de ces idiots ne sera pas en mesure de comprendre ce que nous disons. La plupart d'entre eux sont aussi Ã©pais que deux planches courtes."

>(Yes because the rest of these idiots won't be able to understand what we're saying. Most of them are as thick as two short planks)
_**"Il ne se passe rien Fishlegs. Elle est un Ã"tre humain aussi, elle peut me parler si elle veut."

>(There's nothing going on Fishlegs. She's a human being too, she can talk to me if she wants.)
_**"Elle pourrait Ã"tre humain, mais elle existe dans une toute autre dimension pour vous et moi. Et d'ailleurs , elle n'a jamais vraiment utilisÃ© pour vous parler avant, donc ce qui a changÃ©?"

>(She might be human but she exists in a whole other dimension to you and me. And besides, she never really used to talk to you before so what changed?)
_**"Elle ne est pas si diffÃ©rent. Et je suppose que , aprÃ"s son oncle est mort , je Ã©tais quelqu'un qui elle pouvait se identifier. Je veux dire, je ai perdu maman."

>(She's not so different. And I guess after her uncle died, I was someone who she could relate to. I mean, I lost mum.)
_**"Je sais Hiccup et je compatis. Mais il semble juste bizarre. Je veux dire, elle est, comment mettez-vous? Une dÃ©esse. Et vous Ã"tes bien , vous. Un hoquet comme ils disent, ou de parler arÃ"te de poisson. Je dis juste qui, il semble que il ya plus Ã" lui

que son juste Ãatre gentil."

>(I know Hiccup and I sympathise. But it just seems weird. I mean, she's, how do you put it? A goddess. And you're, well, you. A hiccup as they say, or talking fishbone. I'm just saying, it seems like there's more to it than her just being nice.)
_**"Regardez Fishlegs, je ne ai pas un problÃme avec Astrid Ã me parler. Pourquoi Ãates-vous si inquiet? Tout simplement se dÃotendre feriez-vous?"

>(Look Fishlegs, I don't have an issue with Astrid talking to me. Why are you so worried? Just chill out would you?)
_**"Je suis dÃsolÃ Hiccup, mais je ne fais que regarder pour vous. Tu es mon meilleur ami et je ne veux pas que vous soyez encore un autre gars qui obtient son cÅur brisÃ par les adolescentes coup de cÅur de l'Ãcole."

>(I'm sorry Hiccup, but I'm just looking out for you. You are my best friend and I don't want you to be yet another guy who gets his heart broken by the school's teenage heart-throb.)
_**"Fishlegs, ce est bien . Ne vous inquiÃtez pas. Je ne suis pas un imbÃcile totale. Je sais que le rÃave de l'imbÃcile d'Ãatre avec elle ne arrivera jamais. Je ne vais pas tomber pour elle. Je ne vais pas me blesser. Je promets."

>(Fishlegs, it's alright. Don't worry. I'm not a total fool. I know that the fool's dream of being with her will never happen. I'm not going to fall for her again. I won't get hurt. I promise.)
_**Hiccup could see Fishlegs didn't really believe him, but if he couldn't convince him speaking near fluent French, he wouldn't be able to convince him in English either.

The day dragged by, Astrid felt like she'd been in school for a week, in just one day. She'd spent the last hour with her head in the clouds not thinking about anything to do with reality. The closest she came to thinking about reality was when she tried to think about what movie she and Hiccup would watch tomorrow. She found herself thinking about taking long walks with Toothless and Hiccup over his estate and photographing the sunset and forcing him into a photo with his three legged wolf... Finally though the bell rang signalling the end of the day. She sighed with relief, gathering her things to go home when a voice bought her crashing back to reality.

>"Astrid? We've got training now, remember?" Ruff said tapping her shoulder and rolling her eyes. "Honestly, earth to Astrid! Are you still with us?"
"What, yeah. I'm still here. I forgot about training..." She bit her lip. It was a lie but she didn't particularly care. "I haven't got my stuff with me."

>"I probably have some spare trainers and shorts..."
"No it's fine. Besides, I can't wear a short sleeve top with this rash." She said in a whisper.

>"So you're actually just bunking off?"
"No! I just, I don't have my stuff with me so tell coach I'm sorry and I'll catch up with him later!" She ran off before Ruff could try to stop her.

>"Astrid!" She could hear her friend yelling at her retreating back but she still didn't stop. She just needed to get out of school before anyone else from training cornered her, especially Scott. She was so busy rushing out she didn't notice Fishlegs until she crashed into him, which was surprising really. Stumbling backwards she nearly lost balance and dropped her books.
"Oh shit! Sorry." She sank to her knees to gather her things back up and she heard Fishlegs huff. She stopped to look up at him. "What was that for?"

>"What? Nothing." He said quickly brushing himself off. "Just figures is all." He muttered. She straightened up and glared at

him.
"Excuse me?" She growled. A flicker of fear rapidly spread across his features.

>"Nothing!" He spluttered.
"No no no... you said it figured. What figures Fishlegs?"

>"I only meant... it figures, you running into me because um... I'm hard to miss?" This might be true but she knew that didn't make sense with what he said.
"That's not it, try again."

>"I just meant it figures, Astrid Hofferson is off in Astrid Hofferson World doing her Astrid Hofferson Thing and doesn't notice the humble nerd in her path even when he's my size." That stung more than she thought it would.
"Excuse me?" She asked, this time hurt not angry.

>"Oh come off it. You know what you are. Just do me a favour, leave Hiccup out of it."
"What?"

>"I don't know what game you're playing with him, but I won't let you hurt him. You might be used to walking all over people like me, like him. But Hiccup is a genuinely good guy who would gladly lie down over a puddle so your shoes don't get wet. I won't let you use him like a doormat or a tool. He deserves someone who cares about him."
"Fishlegs I'm not..."

>"I dunno if you're talking to him to lead him on as part of a bet or something, but just whatever it is, stop it. Because he's kind of like a child, he doesn't get it. He'll think it means something and then wind up getting hurt. Please don't do that to him. You might be the school bitch, but I don't think you are an actual bitch, so please, prove me right, leave him out of it."
She stared at him completely stunned by the turn the argument had taken. He thought... What did he think?

>"What exactly do you think I'm doing with Hiccup?"
"I don't know but whatever it is, I'm telling you to stop. He's a good guy and he deserves better." That hurt too. She'd never really thought about whether she deserved someone, or if they deserved her... But hearing Fishlegs, the usually quiet gentle nerd, state outright she didn't deserve Hiccup because he was a good guy... That really hurt.

>"I'm not doing anything with Hiccup! I didn't plan to either! And I know he's a nice guy. I know!"
"So what, now because I've told you to leave him alone you're going to do the opposite?"

>"No! But I don't like men telling me what I can and can't do!"
"I'm asking you to leave him out of it because you'll only end up hurting him!"

>"It's not for you to decide! And you don't know that!"
"Oh please, you're Astrid Hofferson! Of course you'll hurt him! He's no macho marine or stuck up jock. You'd toy with him for sport and then get bored and throw him aside like all the other boys you got bored of!" That was a step over the line.

>"Take that back Fish-face!" She snapped.
"No. Have you even had a proper relationship or do you just like playing with their emotions, making them think they have a chance and then drop them and move onto the next one?"

>"I said take it back!"
"Why retract a statement when the evidence shows it to be true?"

>"It's not true! I do not play with guys emotions!"
"Yes you do and Hiccup is not going to end up being the next heart you break!"

>"I don't break hearts and I'm not trying to break Hiccup's heart!"
"But you will! It's just who you are!"

>"Is not!" Something was snapping inside her. She could not let that happen, not now. Not here. Not in front of Fishlegs.
"It is so and it always will be!" She lost it. She slapped his face hard with her hand, grabbed her stuff and ran out of the building. She didn't stop

running until she reached the familiar creaky gate and pushed through it, finally sinking to her knees and sobbing against the cold stone of her uncle's grave.

****Please do review, your comments keep me writing!****

7. Chapter 7 - Kidding Herself

****I apologise profusely for my absence but with a university degree, volunteer work, a part time job... Fic writing had to take a back seat. And with so many fics demanding my time, it's not easy to keep up to date with them all on a regular basis!**

>So I'm sorry it's short, but I didn't want to keep you waiting any longer.

It was still warm as darkness fell. Astrid was still sat before Finn's grave, cursing her own weakness and sentimentality. She was sat cross-legged on the dry hard ground, head hung low.

>"I just don't know what to do. Truth is uncle; I'm really scared he's right. That I am just going to hurt Hiccup. I don't want to hurt him, but maybe I'm going to. But how can I stay away from him? I need him to help tutor me, but it's worse than that uncle, I like spending time with him. At least, I think I do. I enjoyed it last time. Should I stay away?" She gave a heavy sigh. She'd been battling with herself since rational thought returned after she broke down and cried. The truth was, she feared she was worthless, that she didn't deserve someone like Hiccup.
"I really wish you could answer me. I could do with you being here right now. You always guided me, showed me the way. You were the hero around this place." She got to her feet again and stared at the blank stone as if hoping he might suddenly appear there and answer all her questions, but he didn't appear. And there was no surprised Hiccup standing behind her to ask if she was ok.

>Reluctantly she said a brief farewell to her uncle, even though she knew there was no point. She'd never gotten to say goodbye really, so maybe this was her way of making up for it. She dragged her heels as she made her way back to the house, not really wanting to return home. She was late, even for a training night. She'd be in trouble for that, she didn't doubt that at all.
She hoped maybe he'd keep his calm and that she could explain, very reasonably, that practice over-ran and then she went to visit her uncle's grave. He couldn't get mad about that could he? And she'd tell him her phone was out of charge. Yeah, that should be ok... Shouldn't it?

>When she got through the door though, it appeared it wouldn't be necessary. There was a small microwaveable pizza on the counter in the kitchen and a scrawled note beside it.
_Astrid honey,

>Gone out for a meeting over dinner and drinks. Be back late tonight, sorry there wasn't much in the freezer for dinner. Make sure you get your work done, have dinner and get to bed in good time, can't have you late to school tomorrow!
Take care sweetheart,

>Love
Dad x

>She couldn't help the relieved sigh that escaped her lips as she read the note. He'd never know she'd been out late. She threw the note in the bin and tore the packaging from the pizza before flinging it into the over-used microwave. She glanced in the fridge and freezer, there really wasn't much left. Even less in the cupboards she discovered. She'd have to go to the shops soon or there wouldn't be anything to eat all.

>She carried out her usual routine on nights her dad was out, she

played back the answer-phone messages, just as well, her coach had phoned to ask why she hadn't been at practice. She deleted that and then checked through the mail for anything of interest. She still looked through it like a school girl waiting impatiently to see if she'd get a letter from Hogwarts, she always hoped one day, something unexpectedly amazing would turn up in the post. She didn't know what, she just hoped. Then she began attempting her homework as she ate her pizza. She'd cast aside the chemistry and maths after a short while deciding it could wait until tomorrow when she could ask Hiccup for help, then she felt a sickening feeling in her stomach remembering Fishlegs' words. But if she just needed Hiccup to tutor her there was no harm right? But it's not just tutoring if you order take-out and watch a movie is it? It wasn't a date though, it wasn't like he was taking her to the cinema and paying for dinner... _Except he DID pay for dinner last week. _She'd tried to pay, she reasoned, and she was going to pay this week to even it out. And the least she could do was pay for food since he wasn't charging her to be tutored, right? _Or is that really the reason? Who are you trying to kid? _She should definitely ask him tomorrow about what kind of fee he wanted for tutoring her.

He laughed. He laughed a lot. And really loudly. He threw his head back and laughed as if he never had before, one hand on his stomach as he suddenly doubled over with fits of laughter. She stared for a minute. Seeing him laugh was new enough, but this kind of laughter... It was totally different. Under other circumstances, she might even have smiled because of it. Instead she folded her arms waiting for him to stop laughing.

>"Are you done?" She asked, her teeth gritted.
"Yeah, yeah I think I am done. At least for now. That was hysterical. Very funny Astrid." He said, wiping tears of laughter from his face. She failed to see how it was that funny and she looked at him sternly.

>"I was serious." And then he collapsed into another fit of laughter. "I'm completely serious so would you stop laughing and be serious too?!" She half snapped at him. He stopped abruptly and looked at her seriously.
"Ok. I'll be serious now."

>"Thank you. So, how..." He burst out laughing again.
"I'm sorry! I can't take it seriously!" He laughed and she turned away pouting. "Astrid, Astrid... Look... I'm not going to charge you for my help! That's completely absurd! Where did you even think up such an idea from?!" Hiccup was still laughing, the laugh carried up to his eyes making them bright and dance with a strange playfulness she'd never seen before.

>"Because well... I can't expect you to offer me your services for free!" She protested. He laughed again.
"Astrid you make me sound like a hooker or something! My services?! It would be services if I was fixing your car or something! I'm just helping you out. One class mate to another."

>"But..."
"No buts Astrid." He said seriously as he unlocked his front door. "I'm just helping you out. You don't owe me anything. Oh, before we go in, there's no Toothless today because Gobber is here."

>"Right so my lips have to stay sealed. And Hiccup, I can't just..."
"Yes you can Astrid. And you will. There's no need."

>"But."
"Nope."

>"But"
"No"

>"Hiccup."
"Astrid."

>"Hiccup?"
"Gobber?"

>"Alright there lad? You got company?" Gobber emerged from the living

room. "Astrid?! Oh, I'll leave you to it shall I?"
"Gobber she's here to study. I'm helping her with her maths and science. No need to go running away."

>"Ach, alright then lad. If ya say so." Something in his gaze seemed to not quite believe what Hiccup said. It made her feel uncomfortable, but she didn't know if it was because he thought they were something, or because Hiccup had so casually waved it off. "Well let me know if err... you need anything. I've not thought about dinner at all lad, and I don't know if yer father will be back..."
"Let's assume not since that's the usual case." He replied, there was a note of coldness in his voice that surprised her. "We're probably going to order take-out if you want to get in on that."

>"Aye that would be grand lad. What're ya both thinking of ordering?"
"I think we'll order after doing some work first Gobber. I'll give you a yell when we're ready." He said casually kicking off his shoes and wandering past into the living room. Astrid kicked off her own boots and followed him in, giving Gobber a nervous smile as she passed him.

>"Alright... I'll just be in the other room." He said giving them a courteous nod and exiting. Hiccup waved a casual hand to show acknowledgment of his words but otherwise gave no indication that he'd listened at all. Casual Hiccup was very different to the nervous boy she knew from school.
"Right, you ready to do the homework?" He said tugging his books out of his bag. He had twice as many books as she did she noticed as he spread them over the glass coffee table. She nodded silently and moved to sit down with him.

They'd been working for little over an hour when her stomach gave a loud rumble. Hiccup laughed again.

>"Hungry are you?" He chuckled. She looked away quickly, she'd skipped lunch since there'd been no food at home and her dad hadn't left her any money to buy lunch at school.
"No!" She protested, as very unhelpfully, her stomach gave another loud growl. "My stomach is just making noises."

>"And I thought I was bad at lying!"
"What do you lie about?" She asked suddenly curious. She couldn't see him as a big liar.

>"Are you kidding me? 'Hiccup, what's all this hair on the sofa?' , err it's mine." He said by way of example. " 'Hiccup, why does the dry room smell like a wet dog?' Because I left my wet socks in there and my fur hooded coat. 'Hiccup are you annoyed at me for not coming home at the weekend?' Why would I be annoyed? Because you swore for once you'd actually come home and spend some time with me? No..." He said, his voice bitter and dripping with sarcasm. She bit her lip nervously, maybe there was more to his easy-going lifestyle.

_"Hiccup? Are you...?"

>"Anyway, you're a bad liar. You're clearly starving so we'll just order food a little earlier tonight." His attitude flicked back like a light switch.
"No you don't have to! We've on been studying an hour!"

>"Yeah but we walked back so you were bound to have burned off whatever you had for lunch anyway." He said grinning. She gave a nervous laugh. "Please don't tell me you just ate some limp salad to 'keep your figure'" She weighed it up, what sounded better, that she ate a salad or not at all? It wasn't intentional not to have eaten...
"No I err... I forgot my lunch today and I didn't have any cash on me..." She admitted quietly, brushing back a strand of hair.

>"What?! So you haven't eaten at all since breakfast?!" He sounded truly appalled. "Did no one lend you money?!"
"I didn't ask... I

didn't want to admit that..."

>"Why didn't you say something? I could have given you some money for lunch!"
"I couldn't have accepted that anyway Hiccup. But it's fine. Now can you help me with this question..."

>"We're ordering food right now! You need food to focus! What do you want this week?" He asked jumping up to go to retrieve the menus from the drawer.
"No Hiccup honestly, it's fine!"

>"Gobber we're going to order food!" He yelled. "Now what do you want?" He said turning his attention back to her.
"Hiccup... Oh for the love of... Fine! Kentucky! I want a boneless banquet bucket, side of popcorn chicken and coleslaw... and I'd like a diet pepsi!"

>"Alright Astrid, coming right up. Gobber!" He yelled "Going to order Kentucky! You want the usual?"
"Aye lad, that would be grand thanks!"

8. Chapter 8 - Dangerous Ideas

****Sorry for the long wait... again. Life is crazy****

The Kentucky arrived quicker than the Chinese had last week. Gobber took his shares of the food, which was as much as what Hiccup and Astrid had together, and hobbled into one of the other rooms where they could hear some sort of quiz show blaring from the television set. Hiccup and Astrid ate their food quickly with little discussion except Hiccup smirking and commenting on how he knew she was starving. She'd given up denying it as she stuffed her face with food. She had been hungry. Very hungry.

>Once they'd finished and cleared away the greasy cardboard containers, they attempted to carry on with the work they'd been doing before. It worked for maybe an hour and fifteen minutes, then she started to struggle, distracted by everything and anything, not least of all Hiccup. His brows furrowed as he compared her answers to his own, his nose crinkled as he began checking the complicated sums from his AP math class. As he scrawled on the paper and corrected errors, his tongue peeked out from between his teeth, he ran his fingers absent-mindedly through his hair when he was stuck, blowing air out of his mouth as he considered his options. She noticed the way he twirled the pen in his hand, between long able fingers, just like he had with the chopsticks. There was an elegance to him, in a kind of gangly thin way. She shifted herself and tried to concentrate again, but he was closer now she'd adjusted position and she could practically count the freckles on his cheek, scattered like tiny kisses from the sun. She could see in the dim light, the reddish tinge to his hair, definitely from his father, the way it fell where it pleased in an oddly attractive kind of way. Focus Astrid.

Focus.
He sighed deeply and crossed out some crazily complex equation and started again. She could faintly hear him muttering under his breath, saying odd things like nine to the power of twelve, and eight to the negative tenth power, sixteen over pi– She didn't even know what half of these things meant. He bit his lip and then his tongue reappeared between his lips as he concentrated on the task at hand. Did his tongue always just appear like that? She had to wonder about it, did he always do that? Would he always do that? Did he even know? Would it do that of its own accord if she smashed her mouth against his with slightly parted lips, would it poke out and slip into her mouth to tangle itself with hers and–

>Woah girl. Slow down. What the hell was that? Kissing Hiccup? That's a weird enough thought. Frenching Hiccup? That's beyond bizarre into

the super-natural alien invasion crazy. She shook her head lightly and looked back at her homework.
Focus Astrid. Focus.

>His right hand was drumming those long fingers on his knee as he paused to think again. Her own knee was merely centimetres away from his, if she shifted even slightly, they'd brush against one another. She watched his fingers tap, as if trying to work out if he was playing a song. He had pretty big hands she realised. Not like dinner plates, but they were starting to look like a man's hands should. They were definitely big enough that one hand could pull her into his chest, securing her back and the other could pull her face to his, those long fingers tangling in her hair as they kissedâ€|
Wait noâ€| No that wasn't right. They didn't kiss. Not her and Hiccup. She didn't like him that way. This was getting weird. Maybe there had been something weird in her chicken. Homework, she thought, it needs doing.

>Focus Astrid. Focus.
He gave a soft groan as he suddenly stretched, obviously trying to realign the muscles in his back after being hunched over. The sound he made did weird things to her. It sent a spark across her skin and awakened some primal thing inside her. Something that knew the sound without knowing anything else. She wanted him to do it again, the creature had calmed as soon as it had awoken. She wanted to feel that momentary thrill of excitement. He relaxed again making a slightly different sound that sent her buzzing again.

>Ok no, this was not normal. She was clearly so bored that her mind was doing weird things. She was not attracted to Hiccup. Not that he was bad looking. He was fairly attractive in a dorky kind of way, with his messy auburn hair and those freckles kissing his cheeks and noseâ€| with those bright greens of his under those lovely long lashes, dear god they were longer than hers surely?! And he might be scrawny but he was no leaf in the wind. He wasn't even a twig. Maybe a small branch but he was stronger than he looked, mentally and physically. She hadn't noticed it before, but his arms were looking ever so slightly defined. She wondered where that was coming from, but, she figured, playing wrestle with a wolf probably helped those. And of course he had those wonderfully secure looking hands that would hold her tight and never let go, with those enchantingly long fingers that could easily lace between hers or knot in her hair or trace circles on her back, running down her spine and her sidesâ€| His hand was on his leg again. Were his legs defined now from walking all over the place, with Toothless or to school? What was he like underneath all the shyness? Was he able to be confident and cool and casual? Could he be the man that was starting to evolve in her brain, exciting her and successfully totally distracting her from her work? The _man_ who grabbed her round the waist and pulled her to him with a warm laugh before kissing her deeply? The _man_ who could set her skin on fire with feather light touches? The _man_ who could wrestle with his wolf and then pull her down to join him? The _man_ who might just be the hero she didn't think she needed?

>Focus Astrid. Focus.
She was beyond focussing on anything except Hiccup now. She must have been staring at him for nearly fifteen twenty minutes before he finally noticed she wasn't working.

>"Astrid? You ok?"
"What?" She asked quickly, her cheeks turning pink as she was caught.

>"Are you ok? You're not working and it looks like you stopped about halfway through. Did you get stuck? You should've said, I'd have stopped to help youâ€|"
"Oh no! I just ummmâ€| I kind of lost focus. Got distracted." She tried not to look too embarrassed. She didn't know what was wrong with her. Maybe she was coming down with a

fever. He smiled warmly at her. She wondered if he'd take care of her if she was sick.

>Yeah she must be running a fever or something because why else would that have crossed her mind?!
"Are you sure you're ok? You look a bit dazed and flustered."

>"Oh no honest I'm fine! I just don't think I can focus anymore. You mind if we call it quits for tonight?" He looked hard at her, as if trying to read her mind and see if something else was bothering her. She had never hoped that mind-reading was fictitious more than she did right then. He smiled again suddenly. Oh god, he'd read her mind hadn't he?
"Sure, no problem. But you know that chemistry is due in tomorrow." He reminded her as he scrawled down another answer and bookmarked a few pages in his books before shoving it all to the side. She began packing her things up, turning her back to him until the pink tinge faded from her cheeks properly.

When she made it home, she instantly checked herself for any signs of illness, a fever, anything to explain away the absurd thoughts that had crossed her mind whilst at Hiccup's. But there were no obvious signs. She felt frustrated. There had to be a logical explanation for this! She punched her pillow in annoyance, she felt ready to explode. Her head swimming like she was over-heating, but she shivered despite it, her stomach cramped painfully, maybe it was the chicken.

>She collapsed onto her bed. She needed to shake this off. Get Hiccup out of her head. She needed a distraction. A really GOOD distraction. She tried tugging out her homework, hoping to finish her chemistry, instead finding the money she'd paid for dinner taped to a spare sheet saying 'Nice try Astrid'. It was adorable, sweet, dorky, gentlemanly and completely and utterly annoying. She was trying NOT to think about him. He wasn't that great anyway. Sure he was nice and sweet, and charming, funny in a sarcastic way with a sort of dorky charm about his not totally horrific appearance butâ€¦ She groaned into her pillow and lay there on her stomach for a while. Everything was swimming around her head, she was starting to feel like she was drowning. And all the while, things she'd pushed out of her mind circled ever closer, like hungry sharks waiting for her fight to give out.
The world was so dark. So bitter. So cruel. She saw a light, like an angel, a hero sent to save her. His kind blue eyes smiled down at her, a perfect match to her own, medals shining on his chest. He held out a hand and she tried to reach it, but the dark held her back as it swallowed him whole. She cried, they took him! They took Uncle Finn!

>A flicker, like a candle in the wind. Hope. She followed the faint light, a small scrawny figure held that tiny little flame. But every time she tried to reach him, something pushed her back, or she backed away, nervous, afraid of the light she was so unfamiliar with. Green eyes glowed in the dark, pacing circles around the figure. White teeth were bared, then hidden, a pink tongue lolled. She laughed and tried to touch the thing in the dark, but it was like trying to hold smoke.
Dark. Dark everywhere. It was as though demons were taunting her, following her. Lights flickered and went out, but all the while his held steady. Never quite going out, but always too far to really let her see the figure clearly. Bruise after bruise, scar after scar, tear after tear. Hands grabbed and her, pulled her down, pushed her back, shoved her away. Hands that hit, hands that held, hands that reached. A flash of silver, a spatter of red. Black. Endless black. A flicker of fire, green eyes doubled. Hiccup. Blue eyes wept. Sorry Uncle. Black, black. All black. Silver again, streaking past like a fish. Red lines. Spattering of red on the sheets. Black, black. Black and blue, bruises that decorated her like

baubles on a tree. Red, red. Things were going red. Anger, blood, pain. It's only fun if you get a scar out of it. Still more pain, she clutches herself, searing heat burns in the pit of her abdomen. She won't cry. She touches a bruise and curses. She controls her pain. Black, silver, red, black. The pattern lasts for hours until finally, the red overwhelms her before once more, and her world turns black.

****Please feel free to message me with questions or review!****

9. Chapter 9 - Beatings and Besties

****Sorry for the long wait, and sorry it's not the greatest chapter ever.****

Everyone else had gone. Ruff had pestered her no end. But at least she had some privacy finally. The water from the changing room shower scalded and stung but she hissed through her teeth and ignored it. She had a quick wash, spattering the floor with red before stepping out wrapped in her blue towel, checking the fresh red marks as she dried off.

>"You knowâ€¦ If you don't want people to see, I'd go thighs or hips. I did." A voice said from somewhere beside her. Astrid jumped and dropped the razor blades which disappeared down the drain. "Relax, I won't say. You've waited this long just to keep them hidden." A raven haired girl with bright green eyes was leaning against the wall casually. She wore a simple purple t-shirt and a pair of denim shorts, Astrid could vaguely make out faint scars lining her wrists and on the insides of her thighs poking out from under her shorts. "I'm Heather. We have IT together"
"Iâ€¦ youâ€¦"

>"Listen, I've been there. And whatever your reasonâ€¦ I promise, it's not really worth it. Trust me." Astrid looked at Heather uncertain. "I couldn't see any way out. I got bad. But I got out. Never felt better. And I'm not ashamed of them. These scarsâ€¦" She showed her wrists. "â€¦ They're my battle scars. They show that I fought a hard war and won." She walked over and brushed a thumb over Astrid's bleeding wrist. "You won't find it easy to just give it up. I'm guessing you've got pretty good reasons. But you're not alone. At least, you don't need to be alone. In my experience, being alone is harder."
"I'mâ€¦ I'm not aloneâ€¦ but my friends don'tâ€¦"

>"I figured. But I've been there Astrid. I've cut, I've cried, I've been alone and isolated. And I wouldn't want anyone else to go through that."
"So whatâ€¦ what started it all for you? If you don't mind me asking." Astrid asked sitting on a bench. Heather shrugged.

>"After a while you forget why. I guess I had my own issues. My parents turned out to be adoptive and my real brother is a wanted criminalâ€¦ Yeah I know pretty crazy right? And I was struggling in school, didn't have friends. Was right before I moved here. It just got too much. Somehow, it made sense at the time. What about you? What's your fight against?"
"I errâ€¦ I'd really rather not say. Let's just sayâ€¦ I'm in control of my own pain." Heather nodded.

>"Listen Astrid, I know I'm not your conventional type of friend, but I do know about all this. So if you need anyoneâ€¦"
"Thanks Heather. I appreciate that."

>"Come on, we're going to be late already. Get yourself dressed, let's go. Best not to draw attention to this." Astrid nodded her agreement and got ready, leaving with Heather. Maybe she'd made a new

friend.<p>

"Hiccup I'm justâ€|"

>"Just leave it Fish!" Hiccup hissed as she began taking frantic notes on his physics.
"You got beat up for talking to her, she's just using youâ€|"

>"Yeah, I'm aware of that thanks Fish."
"I just don't want you to beâ€|"

>"Fish it's my life ok?!" He snapped. Why did Fishlegs feel the need to butt in? Hiccup could handle himselfâ€| Mostly. "Now, can we drop this so I can focus?"
"Fineâ€| Fine. But I am just trying to look out for you Hiccup. You're my best friend and I just don't want you to get hurt." Hiccup gave a heavy sigh.

>"I know Fishlegs. But I can take care of myself despite what people think."
"Never said you couldn'tâ€|"

>"It was implied Fishlegs."
"Let's seeâ€| Haddock."

>"Yes miss?"
"Can you give us the answer please?"

>"Oh, sure miss." He got up from his seat and moved to the board to work out the solution. After he'd sat back down the teacher dismissed them. "Fish? We've got English now, where you going?"
"Just need to go check on something." Hiccup nodded and let his friend walk away. "See you in class."

>Hiccup carried on his way but soon found himself face to face with his cousin.
"Oh look, the little Hiccup. Thought I made myself clear before?"

>"Snotloutâ€| I'm just going to English. Can we not do this?" Hiccup pleaded, peering around the bulk of his cousin to stare down the corridor when the safety of his classroom beckoned.
"I warned you Hiccupâ€| I warned you and you didn't listen. You need to learn." He cracked his knuckles menacingly and Hiccup swallowed hard, pulling his rucksack tighter onto his shoulders.

>"Snotloutâ€| not hereâ€| pleaseâ€|" He practically begged. God he wished he was tougher. More intimidating and macho, like a marine or something.
"You will learn eventually Hiccup. You'll stay away from my girl." That irked him.

>"She's not yours."
"Oh so she belongs to you does she?!"

>"She doesn't belong to anyone."
"She's MY girl. Mine! You keep away from her!"

>"But sheâ€|" The fist made contact with his gut before he could get the words out. Then another blow to the gut. And another. Then a right hook to his cheek as he tried to straighten up. He thought something might break in a minute. Then the other cheek. He spat blood. But Snotlout didn't stop.<p>

"Astrid! Wait!" She turned around and groaned loudly.

>"What do you want?" She snapped.
"I have a bone to pick with you." Fishlegs panted catching her up.

>"Well you know, I'm not in the mood to listen to you so do me a favour and fuck off."
"Charmed. But I'm going to talk anyway."

>"Lucky me." She muttered.
"You're still playing him."

>"I'm not playing him Fishlegs!"
"You are! And I'm not going to let you hurt him!"

>"I'm not trying to!"
"But you will. Because that's what you do. Like I said before, you don't care about him, you don't care about anyone else really. You're using him and you'll drop him as soon as you get bored. Which won't take much for you." She was going to wallop him one in a minute. "He's my best friend. Something I don't think you know about. You don't have friends. Just idol worshippers who will leave you the instant your perfect little image gets

tarnished. You don't know what friends are Hofferson. You're just a cold hearted bitch and I want you to leave Hiccup alone." Her hands balled into fists. He was going to get what was coming to him in a minute. Who was he to talk to her like that? What did he know?

>"Shut up." She breathed.
"You know it's true! You act like a big popular girl surrounded by friends and fervent admirers but all you really are is a lonely empty shell. You've got no one. You never will because you're just empty and cold."

>"Shut up!" Her voice was almost a plea, breaking, because part of her knew he had a point. She didn't want to hear any more. She couldn't hear any more. The marks along her arms seemed to burn painfully.
"You're hollow and empty Astrid. And he deserves better. So just go your separate ways and leave him alone."

>"Stop it. Just stop! You don't know anything!"
"I know one thing. Hiccup is a good guy. A true gentleman. A nice guy with a heart of gold. He's friendly, sensitive and true. You're not. You're vindictive, manipulative, cold and bitter. You lie, you're fake, you'reâ€¦" Exactly what else she was she didn't find out because her fist made contact with his wide gut hard enough to wind him. "A bitch" He gasped. "You're a violent bitch." She raised a fist again, aiming for his face this time but a hand grabbed her.

>"Astrid don't!" Heather stood beside her, pulling her hand down. "Don't give him an excuse to say these things. I know it hurts, I know you want him to hurt tooâ€¦ But don't stoop to that level. Don't be Snotlout!" She froze then. She didn't want to be like that scumbag. The scumbag who hit Hiccup. Who hurt him. "Come on Astrid, let's go. We both know you're better than what he says you are."
"Seeâ€¦ I don't know that she is." Fishlegs croaked. This time Heather hit him.

>"What you say to a woman, she doesn't forget. Your words become her scars if she's lucky. Think about what you're doing before you speak. Your tongue is a weapon, a blade that cuts deeper than you think it does. Just think about what you're doing next time." Heather spat pulling Astrid away with an arm around her shoulder.
"Heatherâ€¦ you didn't have toâ€¦"

>"What he said was unfair. Has he ever tried getting to know you? No. Everyone has an act, a mask they wear to get through the day. The people who matter, get to know who we are behind it. Those who just accept the mask have no right to speak like that about you." She shook her head lightly. "Some people don't realise the damage words can do. I know all too well what words can do. I don't blame you for hitting him. But I recommend that you curb it, else his view point just looks correct." They continued down the corridor.
"I shouldn't have hit him. It was wrong, but he justâ€¦ he got to me. He said such unkind things and he was so rudeâ€¦ said I was just using Hiccupâ€¦"

>"Hiccup? The little guy with the big brain? Gangly and auburn? Green eyes?"
"Yeah, Hiccup. Hugo Haddock."

>"Why does he think you're using Hiccup?" So Astrid explained about her uncle's funeral, about the graveyard where he visited his mum, about him helping her with her subjects, about everything. "But that doesn't sound to me like you're just trying to use him."
"I'm not! I'm really not! He's a good guy, he's sweet and genuine and I like himâ€¦"

>"You mean likeâ€¦?"
"No!" She pushed those weird thoughts of kissing him out of her mind and banished the warm feeling that accompanied it. "Noâ€¦ Noâ€¦ Just friends. We're just friends."

>"But you like him more than that?"
"No. I mean I like him, but

just as a friend." Heather gave a slow uncertain nod. "He's sweet, like I said. And he is a true gentleman and he'sâ€¦ He's hurt! Oh my god Hiccup!" She ran towards the crumpled form on the floor, dropping her bag and sinking to her knees holding his head in her hands. "Hiccup look at me! Look at me! Oh my gods he's made such a messâ€¦!" She brushed his hair back so he could look at her with slightly unfocused eyes.

>"Oh my godâ€¦ What happened to him?! I'll get help!" Heather exclaimed as Astrid moved slightly so Hiccup could rest on her more.
"Hiccup? Just look at me, right at me." She pleaded, wiping blood from his face. His eyes were slightly crossed and he didn't appear to be with it.

>"Aâ€¦Asâ€¦Astrid." He croaked out and she gasped kissing his forehead.
"I'm here. I'm here Hiccup. You're ok. I promise you're going to be ok."

>"Astridâ€¦ Can'tâ€¦ Heâ€¦"
"Shhhâ€¦ Shush. I'm not going to let this go on. I can't."

>"Astridâ€¦ Don'tâ€¦ Don't leaveâ€¦ Please."
"I can't keep letting you get hurt like this."

>"Don'tâ€¦ Don't go. Please." He was grabbing her hand and hanging onto it as if his life depended on it.
"I'm right here Hiccup." She brushed her thumb against his cheek. "You're going to be ok. I promise."

>"Stay with me. Please?" She kissed his forehead again, nodding softly. "Thank you."
"I'm not leaving you. But I can't let him keep hurting you."

>"It's worth it." He laughed and she smiled at him.
"Seriously, taking a pounding is worth it to spend time with me?" He gave a slightly delirious gap-toothed grin.

>"Absolutely. Look at all this affection!" she prodded him lightly, chuckling slightly.
"Oh you're milking it are you?"

>"Totally." He coughed. There were footsteps in the hallway coming towards them. "Will you come see me later? I already know they're gonna take me away and it's boring being in bed, especially in hospital."
"Sure, I'll come see you ok? I promise"

>"Mr Haddock? Ok Haddock, we're going to phone for an ambulance to be on the safe side." And the nurse began doing the standard tests to see how badly injured he might be. Astrid didn't move from his side until the ambulance arrived.
"Can I go with him?"

>"Miss Hofferson I don't know thatâ€¦"
"I want her with me. I'm not going unless she comes."

>"Mr Haddock you need toâ€¦"
"Then she comes too." Astrid couldn't help a light chuckle at his stubbornness. He could be really stubborn when he wanted. Eventually, they had to consent to her going with him to get him to go at all.

>They were concerned that he may have cracked ribs or possibly damage to his internal organs and so he was taken in for scans as soon as they arrived. Much to Astrid's relief, there was no internal damage. By some miracle he managed to come out with just some seriously bruised ribs and a slightly swollen face where he'd taken a pounding. Gobber had arrived not long after they had and so he was sat beside Astrid waiting for news of Hiccup.
"He's absolutely fine, he's lucky it wasn't worse, but he's fine. You can go see him."

>"Hiccup?"
"Astrid hey!" She rushed to his side, relieved. She kissed his forehead and smoothed his hair back.

>"Are you ok?"
"I'm fine."

>"Ach lad, you're being used as a human punch bag. This can't go onâ€¦"
"Gobber I'm fine. Just boys being boys."

>"This is not boys being boys Hiccup!" Astrid protested. "He beat the

crap out of you! Gobber is right! This can't go on!"
"I can handle it." He retorted.

>"Maybe, but I can't watch you get pummelled like this all the time! It's horrible."
"Butâ€|"

>"Astrid is right lad. It's not about whether you can handle it or notâ€| It's about us having to see you like this."
"Thank you Gobber. I hate seeing you in this state Hiccup, it's scary." He looked at her, green eyes back in focus, boring into her blue ones as if he was reading her soul. He took her hand and squeezed it.

>"Okâ€| I'll dodge fights and we can work out something so I don't get beat up." He promised and she smiled warmly, kissing his forehead again. Neither of them noticed Gobber's raised eyebrow and knowing smirk as he looked between them.<p>

"Just friends?"

>"Yes? Why do you keep questioning that?" Astrid asked on Friday night as she munched her way through a box of Maltesers.
"Becauseâ€| What I saw the other dayâ€| that's not JUST friends. Friends get concerned sureâ€| But the way you were with him, the way even his addled brain made him look at youâ€| that's more than friendship." Heather said pinching a Malteser.

>"It is not." Astrid protested. "What are we starting with?" She asked holding up two DVD cases.
"Let's start withâ€| Just go with it. That's just feel good and funny." Heather said as Astrid put the DVD on. "But it really is Astrid. That's not a bad thingâ€| You care about him. A lot. And the way he looks at youâ€| That's how guys look at girls in movies! What's wrong with admitting there's something there?"

>"Because there's not! We're just friends." She insisted again as they started the movie. She was staying at Heather's for the night and was loving it so far. No father around, actual food in the house, crap cheesy chic flicks, chocolate, and a real friend to talk with.
"Denial. You like him. He likes you. And when you figure that out, I shall sing and skip chanting 'I TOLD YOU SO!'"

>"Oh shut up Heather!"
"I look forward to rubbing it in your face." Heather said raising her glass of milkshake.

>"Well, here's to a good night with a good friend."
"And here's to fighting the dark."

>"To scars being scars."
"To you admitting you like Hiccup!"

>"Hey!"
"Cheers!"

10. Chapter 10 - Fighting a Losing Battle

**Hello all, I apologise profusely for my absence as of late. I have been struggling to manage my job, degree and anxiety and motivation has been really lacking. I've been so ashamed of myself for not writing I avoided my laptop, I avoided checking the site and even my emails making my boyfriend check instead! But I am fighting my way back. However, over the period between april and june, I do have several major assignments and a very busy period at work so please bear with me if I slow up!

>I do plan to update the other fics but this just happened to be the first to get an update.
Thank you for following these stories, it is your reviews and messages that keep me going. (I'm sorry it's not terribly long but I felt the chapter had to end there. I will try to update again soon)**

It was weeks before Astrid saw Hiccup in school again. She'd seen him out of school for study sessions, and in hospital, but Gobber had kept him off for a time. Astrid couldn't blame him. With Hiccup's injuries getting worse and worse each time Scott attacked him, Astrid was surprised he came back at all. But like Heather, like herself, Hiccup was a warrior. He kept getting back up after each battle, no matter how badly he had come off. To them, each scar was a badge of courage. They might have been knocked down, broken and battered, they might have really thought they had lost the war, but they kept fighting. Astrid knew they were warriors. And warriors don't give up.

Astrid remembered her uncle Finn again, he'd always said it didn't matter if you fell down, what mattered was getting back up and carrying on. He'd first taught her that when she'd been learning to roller-skate and kept falling over. She'd been so cross, she couldn't stay up for very long and the other kids were all skating around flawlessly. He told her it would take time but she was impatient and with every fall she tried to give up. But he would not let her. And eventually she learnedâ€¦
>â€¦ And now those skates were buried in a box in her garage. Dusty. Faded. Untouched. It made her feel so sad. He spent all that time teaching her things, and the only thing she regularly practiced was combat. Perhaps it was time to dig out those old things and learn again. But as she entered home room, she realised that none of that would happen any time soon.<p>

Hiccup was desperate to be invisible. The teacher was talking about bullying and how it was bad and how she hoped no one in this class was responsible for some of the violent bullying taking place in school. It didn't really surprise him that no one had ever dobbed in Scott. People were scared of him. And even as they sat there, Scott cracked his knuckles in Hiccup's direction, the threat plain on his face.

>Then the unexpected happened.
Astrid had just walked in as Fishlegs raised a hand and said "Astrid has punched me a few times."

>There was silence.
All eyes turned back to Astrid. Hiccup felt his heart drop down to his knees.

>"Astrid? Is this true?" The teacher asked, peering at Astrid through her glasses. Astrid stood there and stared. Fishlegs turned away. Astrid could hardly lie. She was in trouble every now and then and Fishlegs was squeaky clean.
"Yes." She said plainly. Hiccup's heart dropped further. He knew she could throw a punch. But why would she attack Fishlegs? Fishlegs was hardly one to pick a fight or provoke a girl like Astrid. The realisation was a huge blow to the gut and Hiccup made eye contact for a brief second before he looked away from her, sad and disappointed.

Astrid's own heart sank when Hiccup turned his back on her. Her whole body seemed to ache with a pain she couldn't understand. She made to walk away.

>"I think Astrid you and I need to have a chat with the headmaster. Wait for me outside his office please." Great. That would mean a lecture and a phone call home. Then things would get worse. It was truly starting to feel like she was fighting a losing battle. No. She would not lie down and cower. She knew she shouldn't have punched Fishlegs, but she was not about to suffer for it. No more bruises. No more. She would not make blue her skin. Fishlegs would not be her undoing.
But Hiccup might.

>The disappointment, the sadness and shame in his face. That hurt more than a hundred blades or a thousand fists. And it killed her. The fresh cuts seemed to scream to open, itching where they were healing and her scars tingled like a million tiny pinpricks. No more pain. No more. She simply nodded and walked away.
But she didn't go to the headmaster's office. She ran. She ran out of school and down the road. She ran to the graveyard and stopped at her uncle's grave. She sobbed to him about how sorry she was as her hands shook and blood dripped on the grass and the dirt. Then she ran further still. She ran past her home and out onto the edge of Berk. She ran into the wooded areas and ran through the trees. She ran and ran and ran. Finally, she could run no more and she collapsed onto the muddy ground and sobbed. Her shaking hand made another cut. She didn't even feel the pain. She let the blood dribble down her wrist as she cried, a crack of thunder overhead as the rain began.

There was a soft growl and a pair of glowing eyes. They emerged from the thicket of trees and sniffed. They knew that scent. The wolf lumbered over, sniffing. The human didn't even flinch. Was it because she knew it was him or because she no longer cared? He could smell the steel of her blade clasped in her hand. He could smell her blood on it, and on her wrists. Why had she done this to herself? Toothless could not understand. He nudged her lightly but she didn't respond. He nudged her hand, the one holding the blade and it fell to the ground. But still she did not move. He nudged and nuzzled and whined constantly and eventually she gave it up. She gripped a hand in his fur tightly and rested her head on him, sobbing into his fur. Toothless gave a small rub of his face against her. He did not know why the human girl cried. He did not know why she was all the way out here, alone and hurting herself. But he knew she was a good person. He knew his human liked her a lot. Toothless stayed there, even when the rain poured down. An alpha protects his own. And she was one of his pack now. And he would take care of her.

Hiccup had heard Astrid had not been at the headmaster's office as she was supposed to have been. The teachers were furious that she had run away. But he knew there was concern too. People didn't just run out of the school, even when in trouble. And Astrid had never been known for being a flight risk. She was brash, tough, and occasionally violent. But she wasn't a coward. Astrid surely wouldn't run away from a lecture by the headmaster?

>Maybe he had been wrong. Maybe she wasn't everything he had thought her to be. But why, he wondered again, would she punch Fishlegs? Why would she punch one harmless nerd, and offer to help another? Or were they two different types of sport to her? Fishlegs and Hiccup had not spoken much all day. They hadn't even spoken to each other much.
A girl approached him at lunch. Hiccup recognised her but not from his classes. Her name wasâ€¦ Helen?

>"Hiccup, have you seen Astrid?" She asked. That puzzled him. Why was sheâ€¦ then he remembered a very blurry memory of the day Scott had hospitalised him. Astrid had been with someone, this girl. What was her name again? "Hiccup? I've been looking for her all day but I haven't seen her. I'm worried. Have you seen her?" Heather. That was her name.
"Not since this morning. She ran off." He mumbled, pushing his potato around his plate.

>"What? Why?" Heather demanded, surprised.
"She got in trouble."

>"Don't be childish. She wouldn't run off just for being in trouble."
"Well I didn't think so either. But the teacher found out she had punched Fishlegs and sent her to the head but she never

turned up. They checked cctv and she ran out of school."
>"What?!" Heather looked fairly angry now. "She wouldn't run for no good reason."
"That's what happened." Hiccup mumbled, somewhat sadly. Heather turned on Fishlegs who shrugged.
>"She's not as brave as Hiccup thought. Too cowardly to face up to what she did."
"Oh and you're the brave one?" Heather snarled.

>"I reported the bully. That takes guts."
"Didn't report the bully who beats the shit out of your friend here though did you?" She retorted.

>"Nor did Astrid." He said plainly, taking a mouthful of beef. Heather now really got mad. She grabbed Fishlegs by the front of his shirt and growled in his face.
"If anything happens to her, it's on you. And believe me, I'll make you feel every drop of guilt you deserve to feel for it."

>"What do you mean 'if anything happens to her'?" Hiccup asked, the concern now back and clear in his voice.
"If she didn't tell you it's not for me to do. But believe me, you'll pay if anything does." She said, warningly to Fishlegs.

>"But what do you mean byâ€¦" Hiccup began again. Heather turned to look at him.
"If you haven't noticed, and if she hasn't told you it isn't my place to do so." Now Hiccup had more questions but Heather was already walking away. He dropped his food to the table and hurried after her.

>"Heather! Heather wait!" He called. She stopped and turned to face him.
"What?" She snapped.

>"Whatâ€¦ what are you worried might happen to Astrid? Pleaseâ€¦ I don't want to see her hurt."
"Then I suggest you don't look." Was her blunt response. Hiccup's heart stopped in his chest. "Look Hiccup, sometimes people hide pain. Sometimes people can't hide it any longer. Sometimes people can't deal with it." His heart began beating again, now in a rapid terrified pounding. "If Astrid ran, it wasn't the teacher's she was scared of. Whatever made her feel threatened enough to run, whatever finally broke herâ€¦ That's what the problem is."

>"I have toâ€¦ we need toâ€¦ we have to find her. And help her."
"And how do you propose we do that Hiccup? Like I said, she wouldn't run. She's a warrior. She's not afraid of a fight, a battle. There's something else we don't know. No one does. And if she's determined to hide it still, to protect herself from it, we won't find her. She'll either come back on her own orâ€¦" She tailed off and bit her lip. Hiccup wasn't sure he wanted to hear the 'or' but he asked anyway.

>"Or what?"
"Or the police will find her body."

End
file.